

Successful organizations are able to articulate a bold, compelling, doable vision and mission. They communicate it in brief, concise, and memorable language. Told from the perspective of someone who was deeply involved, here is the story of how the U.S. Forest Service's enduring motto was born, how it was introduced, how it grew into prominence and was adopted, and why it has endured almost 30 years.

“CARING FOR THE LAND AND SERVING PEOPLE”

THE ORIGINS OF THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE MOTTO

It was early 1985 in Washington, DC. A group of former U.S. Forest Service forest supervisors, mostly recent arrivals in the Washington Office (WO), were having monthly breakfast and brown-bag lunch meetings to discuss field issues and prepare advice for the chief. They referred to themselves as “The Dirty Dozen.”

That year the proposed Bureau of Land Management–Forest Service land exchange, in which the two agencies would swap parcels of land with the goal of making management easier for both, was one of the biggest issues. Boundary lines were being redrawn on maps. Politics around the issue were in full bloom.

The Dirty Dozen invited Chief Max Peterson for an informal meeting and cocktails at the home of Bill McCleese (one of the Dozen) and proposed that a first-ever national forest supervisor’s conference be assembled to address urgent servicewide issues

and the future of the Forest Service. Both Chief Peterson and Associate Chief Dale Robertson agreed. Lynn Sprague, then director of information systems, was appointed to get the ball rolling.

Lynn called Regional Forester Zane Smith of Region 5 and requested Mack Moore, a leadership development specialist, to help design the conference. Mack was not available, so Zane assigned me to go to Washington in his stead. Bob McDonald, Roger Franz, Coy Jemmet, and I met in a small room at Fort Myers, Virginia, for several days in the spring of 1985 to start planning the conference. Coy, one of Lynn’s staff assistants, was

BY LOU ROMERO

assigned as WO liaison to facilitate access and communicate our progress to Lynn and the chief.

We canvassed the regions, stations, and the WO, collecting hundreds of urgent topics from them. The three topics cited most often were “career ladders,” “balanced programs,” and “Forest Service future,” in that order. After distilling those topics we drafted an agenda and began to brainstorm potential conference themes. Coy had recently heard the phrase “caring for the land and serving people” around the office and he suggested it as a potential theme, one of four or five to consider. During a progress briefing, we presented the short list to Lynn Sprague, Chief Peterson, and Associate Chief Robertson. They chose “Caring for the Land and Serving People” as the conference theme. After several planning meetings through the summer, we finally felt ready to present the final design to the chief and his immediate staff in September 1985.

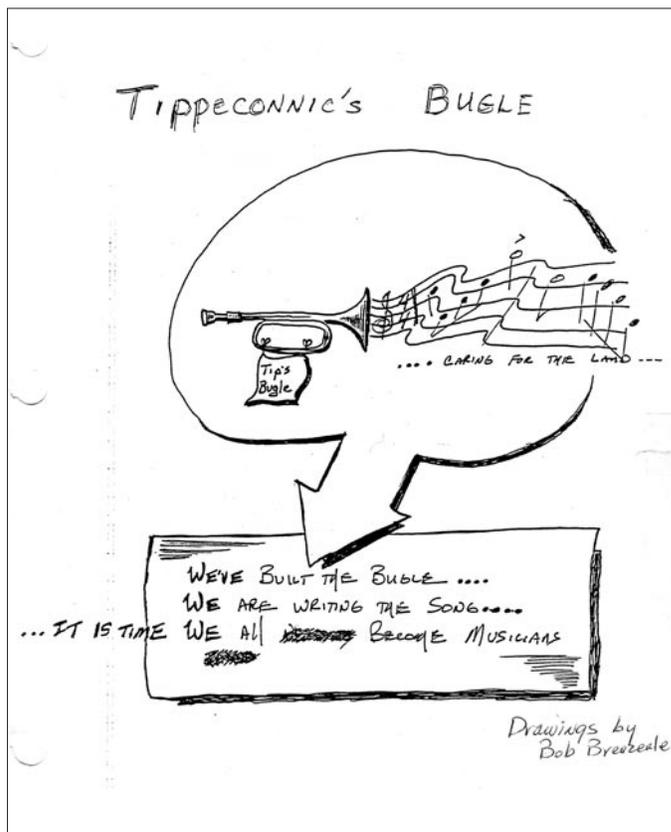
INTRODUCING THE SLOGAN

The dates for the conference were set for November 13–15 at Snowbird Ski Resort, Utah. Virginia Tribe, from the Lolo National Forest, and I served as co-facilitators of a 12-person cadre. A banner with the phrase “Caring for the Land and Serving People” was displayed on a humble paper banner at the front of the room. The core topics we included in the agenda were Forest Service leadership, Forest Service image, communications, workforce morale, organization/roles/people, a balanced resource program, land management planning, and political environment.

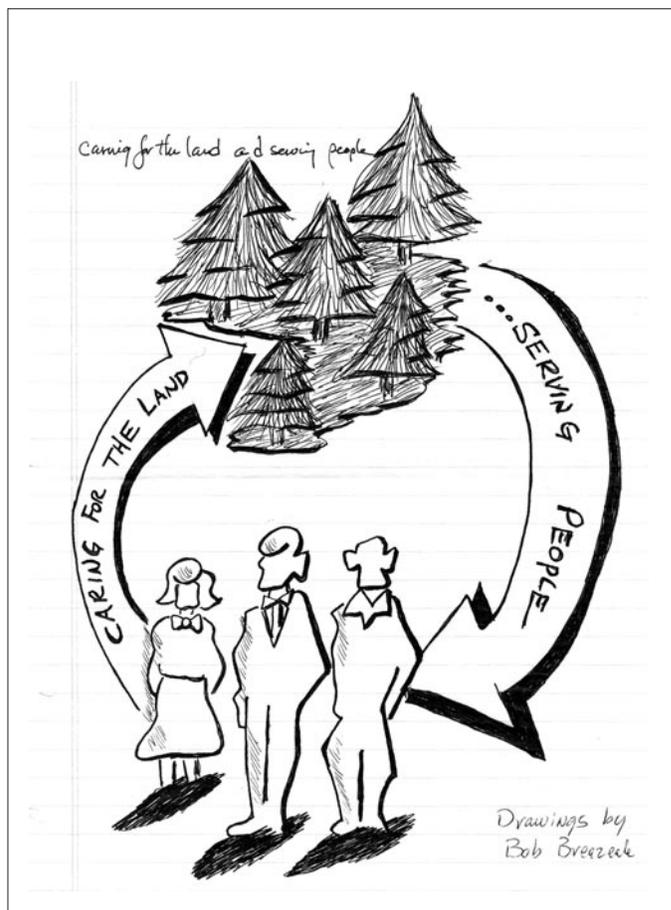
The large assembly was divided into smaller groups to work on the different topics. Bob Tippiconic, forest supervisor of the Coronado National Forest, was a spokesperson for the small group that dealt with the Forest Service leadership topic. I remember him passionately referring to the conference theme as being the most clear and compelling statement of the Forest Service mission he had ever seen or heard expressed. Many heads nodded in agreement. Later, during a break, Bob Breazeale, the forest supervisor of the Gallatin National Forest and a person with some artistic talent, created two flip chart drawings. He called one “Tippiconic’s Bugle.” It showed a bugle issuing music notes and the words “caring for the land” from the bugle. Below the bugle he put a framed statement: “We’ve Built the Bugle... We are writing the song... It is time we all become musicians.” The second drawing had a group of five trees at the top and three persons at the bottom, with two arching arrows forming a circle around them. One arrow pointed from the people to the trees with the words “Caring for the Land” and the second arrow pointed from the trees to the people and reads “Serving People.” During the rest of the conference participants often pointed to the banner theme and Bob’s drawings to emphasize the compelling nature of the Forest Service mission. By the end of Snowbird, as the conference became known, there was no doubt the forest supervisors owned the slogan.

Results of the Snowbird conference were summarized in the weekly bulletin from the WO, *The Friday Newsletter*, dated November 22, 1985. Included as section subheadings were a few of Chief Peterson’s quotes. It was the first time I saw the phrase in an official Forest Service publication:

“Caring for the Land and Serving People”; “There Should Not Be a Place in the FS Where ‘We Have Always Done it That Way’”; “Either We Change or We’re On the Path to Becoming Dinosaurs”; “Our Behavior Will Be More Important Than the Words We Carry Back”

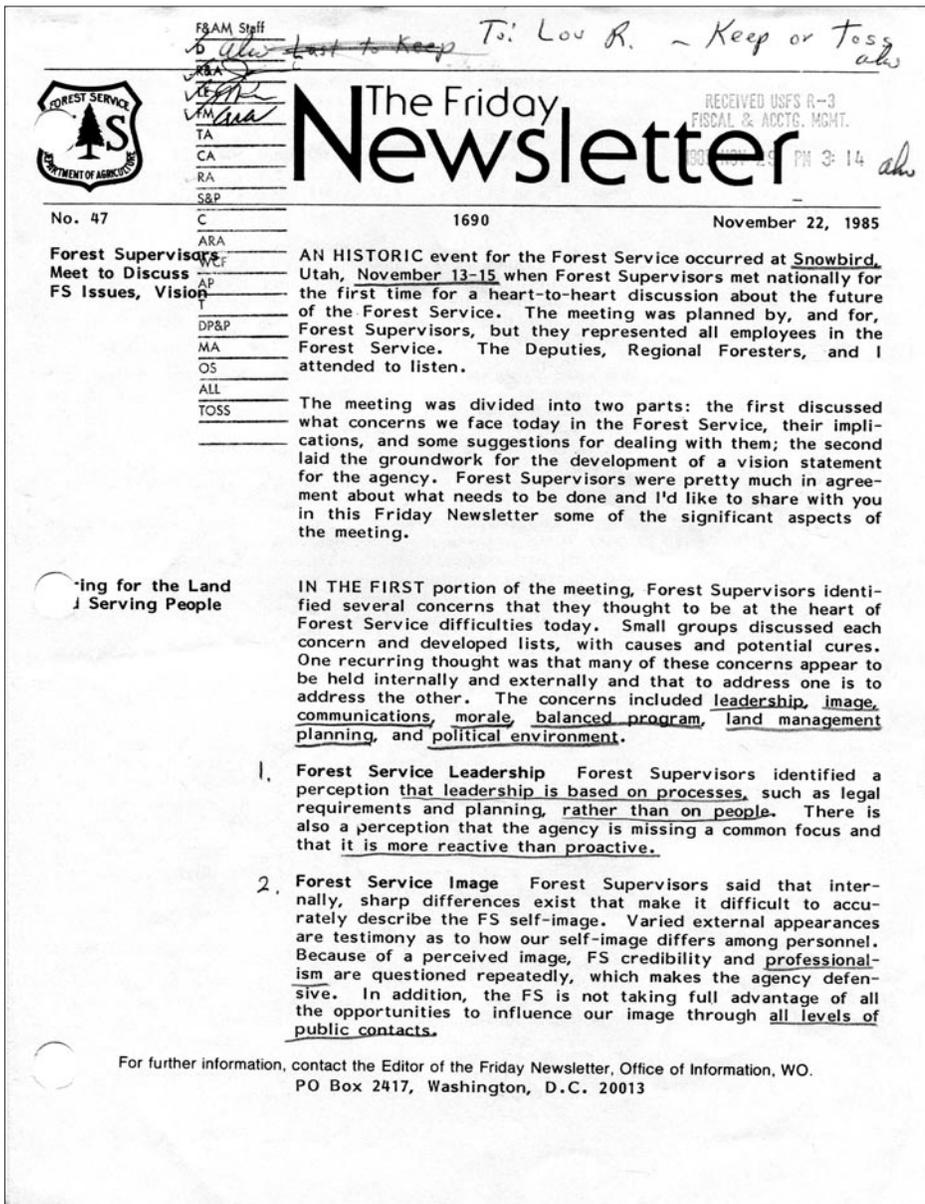


Bob Breazeale’s flip chart drawing he called “Tippiconic’s Bugle.”



Bob Breazeale’s flip chart drawing “Caring for the Land, Serving People.”

ALL ITEMS ARE FROM THE AUTHOR'S PERSONAL COLLECTION



Chief Peterson's *The Friday Newsletter* from November 22, 1985, was the first official publication in which the author saw the slogan.

FUTURING

Before discussing “futuring,” it may be helpful to provide a bit more background. In July 1984, Chief Peterson had given a speech titled “Traditional Values, Not Traditional Methods” at a regional foresters and directors (RF&D) meeting in Salt Lake City. The speech received widespread attention and focused a great deal of energy on the future of the Forest Service. Emerging trends signaling serious social, political, economic, and technological changes were becoming more and more obvious. Futuring workshops engaged hundreds of employees servicewide in trying to understand the meaning of such trends and to envision a different future. Dr. Ross Whaley became our internal futuring guru. I became one of his pupils and a futuring facilitator myself. I believe these workshops created an atmosphere of “future-tense thinking,” as well as an expectation and readiness in the workforce for a more hopeful Forest Service vision.

One of the principal commitments made at Snowbird was to

in an official Forest Service publication.

In my opinion, the distribution of this important document was poorly handled. It simply appeared in the mail with no communications plan or process for engaging employees in understanding its significance. The document soon joined other unused documents on shelves and in file drawers and faded from memory. However, the phrase, “Caring for the Land and Serving People” did not fade. It took on a life of its own! I soon saw it appearing in memos, letters, stationery, and eventually Forest Service publications, and I heard it cited in speeches and meetings everywhere.

REVITALIZING THE 1986 VISION

A few years later, June 1991, at an RF&D meeting in Cody, Wyoming, Chief Dale Robertson chartered another effort to establish a vision for the Forest Service. He named Jerry Sesco, deputy chief of research, leader of that team. Dave Miller of the

articulate a vision for the Forest Service. On December 19, 1985, a preliminary draft was circulated to collect feedback servicewide, with the goal of having a final vision statement printed and distributed by July 1 of the following year. The chief chartered a team for this work on April 29, 1986. The team included a forest supervisor from each region. I was asked to serve as facilitator.

It was important that the “vision work” should be led by and issued from the chief’s office. As for getting the work done, we did the next best thing. Our first meeting was in Dale Robertson’s office. In fact, Dale personally helped me move furniture and set chairs around the perimeter of the room for it.

After two or three meetings and a progress report issued in *The Friday Newsletter* no. 23, June 6, 1986, we were ready for the chief and his staff to review our “near-final” draft. The draft contained three sections: Our Mission, A Proud Heritage, and Our Vision. I vividly remember that during the meeting some staff members opposed the use of the word “vision.” They characterized it as too “new age,” even though the word “vision” was already common in management literature like Tom Peters’ *In Search of Excellence*, Warren Bennis’s *Leaders*, and Peter Drucker’s *Managing in Turbulent Times*. Nevertheless, our team decided to change the wording from “Our Vision” to “The Future—Strengthening the Nation.”

We did not meet our July 1 goal. The final document was distributed in October 1986, soon after Dale Robertson became our twelfth chief. Publication of the pamphlet, titled “The USDA Forest Service: Caring for the Land and Serving People,” marked the second time I saw those words

United States Department of Agriculture

Forest Service

FS-402



The USDA Forest Service

Caring for the Land
and Serving People



This pamphlet was the first publication aimed at the public that contained the slogan.

Washington office and I served as cofacilitators and consultants for the project. Having learned from the passive, ineffective distribution of the 1986 vision statement, Jerry named Jeff Blackwood, forest supervisor for the Umatilla National Forest, to lead a packaging, marketing, and implementation strategy.

During 1992 we conducted numerous employee workshops servicewide. Focus groups were engaged in shaping the marketing strategy and achieving a collective understanding of the value and use of a vibrant Forest Service vision and its distinction from mission—the reason we exist.

In early 1993 the final product of this work was successfully distributed with a complete marketing and communications plan. It was produced in at least three different sizes: poster, letter, and pocket size. Composed of three sections—mission, vision, and guiding principles—it had a light-grey background with bold grey lettering. Even today I often see it in Forest Service offices and some employees still refer to it. Occasionally, someone will pull out a well-worn pocket-size version and point to specific wording.

FROM SLOGAN TO ICONIC PHRASE

The Mission section of the 1993 document begins, “The phrase, CARING FOR THE LAND AND SERVING PEOPLE, captures



MISSION

Caring for the Land and Serving People

United States Department of Agriculture
Forest Service

The pocket-size “Mission” card initially distributed in 1993 contained the agency’s vision statement and 13 guiding principles.

the Forest Service mission. As set forth in law, the mission is to achieve quality land management under the sustainable multiple-use management concept to meet the diverse needs of people.”

Two more national forest supervisor conferences have followed Snowbird. Sunbird was held in Tucson in 1989 and Icebird in Nebraska in 2004. Both were designed to address urgent issues and the rapidly changing horizons ahead. The original slogan remained a prominent and steady beacon at the center of both agendas.

Five chiefs have followed Dale Robertson. Some have affirmed the 1993 statement of mission, vision, and guiding principles. Each has published his or her own statement of priorities. Throughout all the changes of top leadership and despite the diversity of the chiefs’ individual styles and priorities, one thing has remained constant: the iconic phrase “Caring for the Land and Serving People” is in the forefront of Forest Service communications.

ORIGIN OF THE WORDS

As I watched the phrase achieve iconic status, I began to wonder where in the world the seven words our little Snowbird design team presented to Chief Peterson in 1985 had come from. After several years of

searching, I finally found the real origin. In a conversation with Dick Flannelly, former Forest Service training director, I learned that Dr. Patricia Woods, president of Woods Institute, which runs training seminars for federal employees and others, was the one who originally voiced those words in a Forest Service context.

I contacted Patricia to confirm my discovery. Here is her confirmation in her own words, dated December 11, 2009:

In May 1985, Dick Flannelly, John Karwolski, Cathy Burger, and I met in Milwaukee to discuss Chief Max Peterson’s initiative on the Forest Service’s Heritage, Values, and Traditions. The Chief wanted to set up a history seminar for Forest Service staff. Dick had worked with me on the Management Policy Seminar and knew that my doctorate is in American History so he included me on the project as a consultant. There was a great deal of discussion at the meeting regarding the different values of new people coming to work at the agency, from a women and minorities standpoint and also the expansion from the forester discipline as line officers to the “-ologists” who were then being hired. I remember Dick wondering aloud, “What is it that ties us all together? We have NFS, Research, and State and Private [Forestry] in addition to all of this new, younger generation.” No one said anything at first and then I said, “It seems to me that no matter what your education and background is, people who work for the Forest Service care for land and they serve people.

We actually conducted about six of the history seminars. We made an instructor’s notebook and tapes of Dick Costley, Pete

Steen, and me so that forests could eventually run their own seminars. For a number of years I actually gave history lectures on Forest Service history at regional new employee orientations. I no longer do those but, like yourself, still keep on top of the past.... Guess I should have copyrighted that slogan!

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Coy Jemmett must have either attended or heard about Patricia's history seminars and her use of "Caring for the Land and Serving People" between May and September 1985. While our team worked on conference plans, Coy suggested the phrase, and we presented it as one of four or five potential themes.

Personally, I think the slogan has endured because it conveys a clear sense of mission and purpose as well as a hopeful, doable vision. It is simple and easy to grasp. The words seem modest,

soft, and gentle in the saying, yet they are bold, compelling, and inspiring in meaning and effect to both the speaker and the listener. I retired from the Forest Service in 1994 and am now a Forest Service volunteer. When I see or hear our slogan it still elicits a sense of pride because it communicates who we uniquely are and what we want to continue to be. □

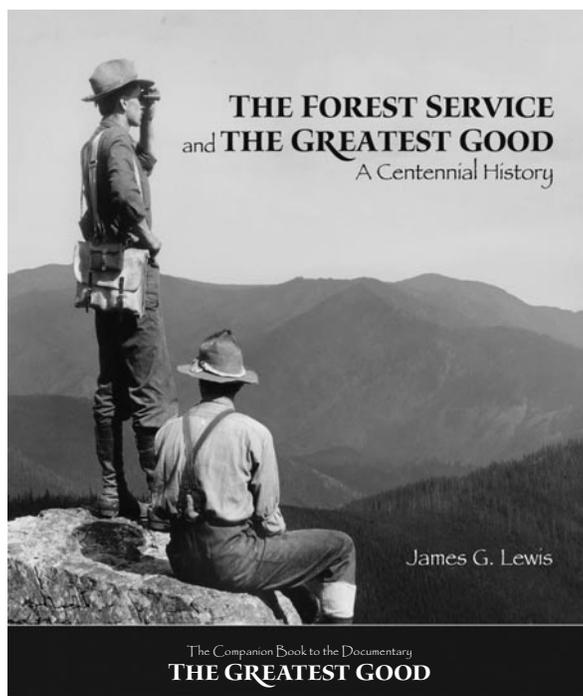
Lou Romero started with the U.S. Forest Service as a GS-3 forestry technician and retired 32 years later as the only Internal Facilitator and Change Consultant in the agency. In recognition of his outstanding contributions to the agency, Romero received the Organizational Leadership Award. The award was created soon after the Forest Service was established; he is one of only three persons to ever receive it.

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