

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Forest History in the Public Discourse

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Recently, the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) rated web sites in 150 different environmental topic areas for their value to journalists. In the “Forests” category, nearly 140 web sites were evaluated. The Forest History Society’s web site was one of only five sites that received SEJ’s highest rating of five stars. We are proud of this recognition but even more pleased that our effort to help journalists to value and include more forest and conservation history in articles, editorials, and extended reports is successful.

The Forest History Society’s efforts to reach journalists commenced early in its history in part because the second executive director, Woody Maunder, was himself a journalist. Maunder earned a journalism degree from the University of Minnesota and worked for Minnesota newspapers before serving as a journalist on combat cruisers during World War II. He expanded our efforts to reach out through a variety of publications starting in the 1950s, including the Society’s journal, then simply called *Forest History*.

Our efforts with journalists and the media over the years admittedly took a back seat to building the scholarly credibility of the Society. We developed the bibliographic and archival searchable databases that have been such a unique and powerful tool for all who research topics in forest and environmental history, but we never found that extra time, and funding, to really help journalists access and use the information.

Nonetheless, the media stumbled across the Society’s rich collections and able staff. When journalists did call for information, they were given high priority. Occasionally, journalists have visited the Society. For example, Rocky Barker, environmental writer for the *Idaho Statesman* in Boise, Idaho, visited the Society’s headquarters as an Alfred D. Bell Fellow in 2000 and used oral histories, company files, and government publications to add to his store of information on the Central Idaho Primitive Area. In 2005, he published the non-fiction book *Scorched Earth: How the Fires of Yellowstone Changed America*, and then co-produced the fictional A&E Network movie, *Firestorm: Last Stand at Yellowstone*.

Perhaps the most poignant testimony was provided by T. Edward Nickens, a freelance journalist specializing in natural history, environmental reporting, and outdoor adventure. After doing research at FHS, he wrote in *Outdoors Unlimited* magazine:

“The Forest History Society’s archives—books, journals, oral histories, photographs—constantly amaze. They are a treasure for working environmental journalists. Mined for anecdotes, hard data, the telling quote or visual image, the Society’s collections have helped bring life to my magazine’s articles, book chapters, and public presentations.”

Two efforts in the 1980s and 1990s started to bring the Society’s efforts with journalists into focus. To honor John M.



Collier, a New Orleans investigative reporter who also spent a long career with the Southern Forest Products Association, the Society established the John M. Collier Journalism Award to encourage excellence in journalism in forest and conservation history. Since 1987, through the award, FHS has recognized journalists and brought them to the Society’s headquarters to become more familiar with its resources. The award is now given collaboratively with the Institutes for Journalism in Natural Resources.

The second effort was the initiation by Pete Steen of the Society’s Issues Series books. Conceived as a way to reach a general audience, including journalists, the series brings a historical context to the most pressing issues in natural resource management today. The series was successful beyond anyone’s expectations, highlighted by *American Forests: A History of Resiliency and Recovery*, which now has reached over 25,000 locations. For the first time, the Society had a publication that would serve journalists’ needs for unbiased background information.

Our rich collections of photographs and moving footage continue to be of interest for a variety of documentaries and other reports. Recently, we provided moving footage for a History Channel production on logging technology for a *Modern Marvels* episode; historic film for a *Wall Street Week* show on southern pine in papermaking; images for the U.S. Forest Service centennial film *The Greatest Good*; and photographs for the upcoming Florentine Films/Ken Burns production about the national parks.

All of these efforts have been very positive and productive, but the Forest History Society’s vision includes much more. The Society has a responsibility to bring the lessons of forest history to bear on the complex social, ecological, economic, and political forest policy issues of today. Because development of public policy is first churned about in the public discourse, the Forest History Society is in a unique position to help inform public opinion through its work with journalists and the media. The media and citizens alike urgently need reliable historical context through which forest issues can be understood without distortion.

To support a more aggressive effort to bring a historical context to forest-related news and editorials, the Society will take a proactive part in forest policy debates by informing public opinion. This has been identified as one of five priorities on the Society’s current Stories of the Forest fundraising campaign that aims at putting forest history to work. This priority is supported by the Society’s strategic plan and its stated belief that the Society should “share information and knowledge among all interested in forests and conservation and contribute to public enlightenment about the values that forests have had for mankind.”

We hope that you will support this effort when asked. □