



When the pendulum doesn't find its center: Environmental narratives, strategies, and forest policy change in the US Pacific Northwest

Georg Winkel *

*Institute of Social Environmental Sciences and Geography, Forest and Environmental Policy Group, University of Freiburg, Tennenbacher Strasse 4, 79106
Feiburg im Breisgau, Germany*



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ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s, the US Pacific Northwest has been shattered by a major environmental policy conflict related to the management of Federal forests. These “timber wars” were similar to forest environmental policy conflicts in several other countries, but were particularly polarized. They resulted in a significant change in Federal forest policy from timber production orientation to biodiversity conservation. The change occurred suddenly and had significant economic and social consequences within the region and beyond, but was embedded in long-term societal and institutional trends.

In this paper, I adopt an interpretive approach in order to, first, understand contemporary interpretations of the 1993 policy change and, second, to reconstruct the contemporary discursive ‘landscape’ of the Pacific Northwest including the major resource management paradigms and narratives that guide policy making in this region today. Empirically, my interpretation is mostly built on 37 qualitative interviews with policy stakeholders that were conducted in the summer of 2011.

Based on this evidence, the paper argues that there are four narratives circulating amongst policy stakeholders that represent different conceptualizations of the 1993 policy change. Yet, all narratives highlight the importance of environmental strategy making that mobilized the socio-institutional setting in order to prepare and finally achieve the change.

Current forest policy in the region is characterized by a policy stalemate resulting from the confluence of diverse institutional, context-related factors and the inability of stakeholders to create enough contradictions or crisis by combining these factors in order to promote change-enabling narratives. Four resource management paradigms compete in the region and, within these, narratives and counter narratives on physical and social events are developed. Current forest policy is dominated by an ecosystem management paradigm, but forest management practices aim to reconcile demands arising from the different paradigms to a certain degree, for instance via the concept of “ecological restoration”. Yet, given that the material base that feeds such compromises is finite, a new crisis in Pacific Northwest forest policy in the future is likely.

In conclusion, this paper offers an interpretation of Pacific Northwest forest policy (change) as a process in which social and physical events are ‘discursively mobilized’ by means of narratives that are produced against the background of major natural resources paradigms. This includes the art of ‘discourse agents’ in constructing problematizations and intervention logics to either defend the current policy state or to increase the likelihood of change.

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1. Introduction

Driving up Interstate 5 through Oregon reveals a forest landscape of puzzling diversity: Patches of majestic “ancient

forests” are interspersed with areas of dense plantation forests, burned forest land and recent clear-cuts on private lands. Timber mill architecture still shapes towns in rural Oregon, but the windows of many buildings are broken. In contrast, the drive through the prospering “I 5 corridor” into Portland is attended by the glass architecture of high tech companies.

This scenery is the legacy of one of the most prominent environmental policy conflicts in the United States, the ‘timber

* Tel.: +49 0761 203 3723; fax: +49 0761 203 3705.
E-mail address: Georg.Winkel@ifp.uni-freiburg.de

wars' in Oregon, Washington, and Northern California. This controversy involved foresters, the timber industry, environmentalists, media, courts, scientists, the U.S. president and congress, and several other groups. It was fought over the harvest of old growth forests, and resulted in a dramatic shift toward preservation-oriented management of the National Forests, thereby replacing a timber-oriented sustained yield approach. Change took place within a period of a few years, but was embedded in long-term socio-economic transformation processes (Haynes et al., 2006; Spies and Duncan, 2007; Charnley et al., 2008a).

The US Pacific Northwest forest policy change was a “watershed event in American resource and environmental policy” (Yaffee, 1994, cover text). It also had strong impacts beyond the region. First, the conflict is perhaps the most prominent example of forest environmental conflicts that have developed since the 1980s in many industrialized countries – particularly in the Anglo-Saxon sphere (e.g., in Australia (Lane, 1999, 2003; Ajani, 2007; Hickey, 2009) and Canada (Lertzman et al., 1996; Wilson, 1998; Bernstein and Cashore, 2000; Pralle, 2003; Saarikoskia et al., 2013)) but also in Norway, Finland, France and Germany (Hellström, 2001, for Germany see also Müller, 2011; Winkel and Sotirov, 2011 and Winkel et al., 2011) and Sweden (Elliott and Schlaepfer, 2001; Hysing and Olsson, 2008). All of these conflicts continue to this day. In contrast to the primarily land conversion driven disputes on deforestation in tropical countries, these conflicts developed around contrasting management approaches for temperate and boreal forests – between intensified harvesting patterns to feed timber-based economies on one hand, and (changing) societal demands on these forests that emphasized their importance for recreation and biodiversity on the other hand. Second, the Pacific Northwest conflict produced policy and management innovations that were developed or tested in the region, but later applied elsewhere (Moseley and Winkel, in press). Ecosystem management, ecological restoration, adaptive management and designing policy via bioregional scientific assessments (Shannon, 2004) are well-known examples.

Social and political science scholars studied extensively the changes in Pacific Northwest forest policy that occurred in the early 1990s (Yaffee, 1994; Hirt, 1994; Hellström and Vehmasto, 2001; Burnett and Davis, 2002; Cashore and Howlett, 2007; Swedlow, 2011). However, since then, research has focused more on detailed or ‘technical’ aspects, such as the effects of the

Northwest Forest Plan (Haynes et al., 2006; Spies and Duncan, 2007; Charnley et al., 2008b), or national forest policy initiatives (Vaughn and Cortner, 2004; Davis, 2008; Johnson et al., 2009). In contrast, the regional forest policy arena and strategy making have received less attention. This is regrettable for two reasons: Firstly, the significant regional and global impacts of the 1993 landmark policy change render this case highly interesting in terms of retrospective analysis that can inform our understanding of the long-term effects of major environmental policy changes; and, secondly, it is obvious that different perspectives on, and conflicts about, forest management in the region have prevailed (Spies and Duncan, 2007). This paper aims to close the gap by addressing the following questions:

- What is the legacy of the 1993 change in Pacific Northwest forest policy? What are contemporary narratives on this change?
- What strategies are currently used in Pacific Northwest forest policy?
- What are the lessons to be learned from the Pacific North West forest policy case for environmental policy making and analysis?

In the following, I will first provide a short introduction on the history of forest policy in the Pacific Northwest (Section 2). This will be followed by an outline of my methodological approach (Section 3). I will then address research questions 1 and 2 (Sections 4 and 5) and will conclude with reflections on my case (Section 6).

2. State of knowledge – a short history of forest policy in the US Pacific Northwest

The history of the US Pacific Northwest is one of logging and timber processing. Following European settlement in the mid-19th century, the vast old-growth forests of this region were first seen as an obstacle to agriculture and development, but soon turned into a source of wealth with growing timber demand, and a source of conflict once the limits of the resource became visible (Hirt, 1994; Langston, 1996; Bengston et al., 2004).

Following Johnson (2007), different forest policy epochs can be distinguished (Table 1). Until roughly 1890, forest policy was characterized by the rapid privatization of public forest land (Huffman, 1978; Dana and Fairfax, 1980). Then, concerns about forest exploitation triggered the establishment of National Forest Reserves (later National Forests) to be managed by the US Forest Service, covering more than 50% of the forest area in the Pacific

Table 1

Epochs in Pacific Northwest policy on federal lands (own compilation based on Huffman, 1978; Johnson, 2007; Sabatier et al., 1995; Burnett and Davis, 2002; Hoberg, 2003; Salka, 2004; Weible et al., 2005; Boscarino, 2009; Moseley and Winkel, in press).

| Time era | Forest management paradigm | Governance arrangement | Relevant types of knowledge/science | Most influential actors | Most important level for decision making |
|--------------|---|---|--|---|---|
| Before 1890 | Exploration and exploitation | Privatization | Diverse | Settlers, timber industry | Local |
| 1890–1945 | Custodial | Science-based conservation and timber management for public welfare | Bureaucratic knowledge, forest sciences | Forest Service, National park service | National government and bureaucracy |
| 1945–1970 | Sustained yield, multiple use | Science-based timber exploitation | Bureaucratic knowledge, forest sciences | Forest Service and timber industry | National bureaucracy influenced by regional interests |
| 1970–1989 | Sustained yield, economically efficient use, multiple use | Science- and planning-based, controlled timber exploitation | Bureaucratic-technological knowledge, computer-based rational decision making, cost benefit analysis | Timber industry, Forest Service, increasingly challenged by environmentalists | National bureaucracy influenced by regional interests |
| 1989–1993 | Forest Crisis/Timber wars | | | | |
| 1993–present | Ecological forestry | Science-based, ecosystem management | Science-based bureaucratic, conservation planning/conservation biology | Environmentalists, Scientists | Nationalization, importance of courts |
| Since 2005 | Social forestry | Participatory network | Social science, local knowledge | Local and regional actors | (Re-)Localization |

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