

I'll admit it; I have a bit of a thick-headed streak in me. Some of my old ways of seeing things seem to die hard, my views on forest conservation included. Since I was a kid I have been repeatedly wandering around one state forest in particular. My first impression of this forest was of the towering stands of hemlock that seemed to go on for miles, and how this place seemed to be exempt from man's influence. Then, when I was about 14 years old, I went on another visit to my forest. (By this time I was thinking of it as "my forest" because of the sense of connection that I was developing with it.) On this particular visit the sense of comfort that I drew from the forest was shattered. There I saw many of the beautiful hemlocks gone, with lots of stumps and a tangle of slash in their place. It looked like a bomb went off. I still vividly remember how stunned I was that anyone could assault nature by cutting down all those beautiful trees and leaving such a mess. What I didn't know at the time was that this was part of some forest improvement work being carried out under the guidance of a forester.

A few decades later, during a visit from the state forester for an inspection of my forest management plan, he repeatedly told me "you're over-stocked." It didn't look that way to me. I just saw an undisturbed section of woods with plenty of trees—the more trees the better, right? However, after taking the advice of a few knowledgeable foresters I decided to be more proactive in managing my forest. I committed to doing extensive thinning, with a few patch cuts. I knew at the time that this would be a good thing. After all, I had been trying to educate myself regarding forestry and conservation. I would be making a long term investment in the quality of my timber stands, and in the short term I would be getting something of economic value out of the woods. This would all be well planned and carefully executed.

And so I hired a forester to come out and mark trees to be removed as part of my thinning. When I first saw all of those blue dots I was a little concerned. It seemed to be an awful lot of trees that needed to come down. And in fact, once all the trees were down it looked like a disaster area. My old ways of thinking started to return. Why did I make such a mess, why couldn't we just leave nature alone? Luckily, those thoughts were only short lived. I can now go to the areas where I first started thinning see a lot more straight, healthy trees with better potential, and more available sunlight to foster those trees. I'm also starting to see rejuvenation; hopefully, the deer don't slow that down too much. From my own perspective it's kind of nice to have the woods a little more open, even though it will only stay like this for a few years.

Somebody once told me that the lumberjack is to the forester as the carpenter is to the architect. In other words, the forester is the one with the vision. I'm not a professional forester but I'm starting to understand and appreciate that vision, the results of which are the healthy, well-managed forests around us. I've returned to that state forest many times since I was a boy, and it recently dawned on me that it is still a beautiful and dynamic forest. The work that they were doing there 40 years ago, which appalled me at the time, was a selective harvest and some thinning. In hindsight the mess that I saw was minimal and was gone in only a few years. Nature took care of that.

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