BOOK REVIEWS


This book is history written by a participant—personal, passionate, and sometimes emotional. The book is extracted from the extensive journals of Jack Ward Thomas. It focuses on the spotted-owl controversy and Thomas’ service as Chief of the United States Forest Service, and covers the period from April 1990 until 29 November 1996, his last day as Chief. The book flows as a continuous narrative because editor Steen selected the journal entries pertinent to Thomas’ time as Chief, and Thomas added comment where needed. The introduction gives historical and biographical background required to follow the narrative.

The Chief’s journals cover a tumultuous period in the history of the U.S. Forest Service and for conservation in North America. Agency budgets and staffing were declining and the old-growth issue had come to an impasse. Most of Thomas’ journal entries deal with contentious issues, such as the old-growth/spotted-owl controversy, President Clinton’s Plan for the Pacific Northwest, the Alaska pulp mill, grazing on public lands, fire management and suppression, and management of the Columbia River basin.

This is an important book for anyone involved in the conservation of natural resources because it forces us to consider the unpredictable relationships among science, politics, and policy. During this period, natural resource policy did not develop from a scientific basis in a logical fashion. Instead, policy and agency direction emerged from the unexpected outcomes of independent actions, and occasionally through the transmogrification of scientific reviews initiated by the agency or administration. The Department of Justice and federal courts were frequently more influential in establishing policy than were the agencies in charge of the resources. Thomas shows clearly how the overriding purpose of management of national forests evolved to be the protection and preservation of biodiversity. This change occurred through application of the Endangered Species Act and regulations on viability retention issued pursuant to the National Forest Management Act. This dramatic change in policy was unplanned, and it was neither recognized nor appreciated by the administration, Congress, or the public. This is a disquieting, but important, message for natural resource professionals.

Thomas is a keen observer of human nature, and his assessments of personality and behavior are candid and blunt. These personal observations come across as honest and never vindictive. They do cause the reader to reflect on human nature, the nature of our society, and our own ethics and motivations. Ecosystem managers will recognize in this narrative the enormous task of building consensus in a pluralistic and democratic society. It is clear from the accounts of the effort to develop a management strategy for the northern spotted owl and Forest Ecosystem Management Team that teams of scientists, working diligently, can reach consensus about ecosystem management. These efforts at scientific synthesis, however, never led to a national consensus on the issues.

In the introduction, Editor Steen comments that “It is history’s good fortune not only that Thomas maintained a journal but also that he is a superb writer: he captures the moment with clarity, grace, and passion.” I agree and think this book will have broad appeal to anyone interested in conservation, to professionals who worked during the period, and to professionals who continue to struggle with issues of biodiversity and ecosystem management. Readers will gain a deeper understanding of the social and political complexities of resource management, regardless of their stand on individual issues. The book also conveys important messages about leadership, professional ethics, and working in a democracy.

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In Search of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker is a forensic analysis of the loss of one of North America’s most spectacular species. It is a challenge to write a book on the ecology and behavior of a little-