

CONSTRUCTING FORESTS: THE NATURE AND TECHNOLOGY OF AMERICAN REFORESTATION

ABSTRACT

The destruction of forests has been a common topic within environmental history but reforestation has received little attention and historians have not adequately emphasized how much forests are ideologically and physically constructed. Various groups over the course of the twentieth century in America have planted forests for different reasons, the Forest Service and the Park Service on federal lands, the timber industry on company lands, and small landowners on their private lands. Planted forests can be considered technologies because they are created and operated by humans for specific purposes. As they grow, they manufacture a product. They are ecological because they remain subject to environmental forces, provide opportunities for other organisms besides humans, and are in fact living systems. Framing planted forests as organic technological systems avoids the wilderness versus artificial landscape division, viewing them instead as places shaped by an ongoing interactive process.

On April 16, 1902 President Theodore Roosevelt, at the urging of prominent scientists and forestry officials, created two forest reserves in the treeless Nebraska Sand Hills. Work began immediately on the first Forest Service tree nursery and a hand-planted forest. For over a century, human labor and ecological processes have combined to produce the Nebraska National Forest. During the Great Depression young men of the Civilian Conservation Corps, working in national forests and national parks, planted millions of trees. The forests they created represent environmental and social engineering through landscape improvement and economic relief. In 1967, one of the United States' largest timber companies, Weyerhaeuser, announced a program called high yield forestry. This technological production of timber involved management through computer modeling and intensive manipulation of the environment for the rapid transformation of tree seedlings into wood fiber. Under this program, tree plantations in the American south produced four times as much timber as unmanaged forests. Environmental restoration and sustainable harvest motivates the members of the American Tree Farm system, who plant trees on their own land. As small landowners control the majority of private forest land in the United States, the potential impact of this movement is great. In all of these cases constructive interaction with the landscape, through creating rather than simply harvesting forests, provides a deeper connection between people and the environment and offers a new perspective for environmental history.