

**Opinion****Sunday, January 14, 2007****Logs not lodges: Manage forests for long term**

By MELANIE PARKER

“Cows not condos.” Someone coined the phrase in the 1980’s to help paint the stark picture that working agricultural landscapes have a higher environmental benefit than vacation-style second home developments. A piece of fertile earth converted forever to asphalt erases the plants and animals who once lived there, the water storing capacity of the land, and the recreational possibilities that previously existed. This sort of conversion of rural landscapes also creates a bold statement about the culture of place. We see ourselves change from a people who live in a place over time and struggle with the challenges of making a living directly from the land, to people who visit the landscape. Moreover, we become the people who work for the people who visit the landscape. A job is a job to be certain, but this kind of economic shift has far reaching implications for how we as humans know our place in the landscape and therefore how qualified we are to be good stewards of the land over time.

Currently, in the forested valleys of western Montana, we are faced with critical questions about the economic activity that is most suitable to the vast tracts of heavily timbered forest lands that are now coming under intense pressure to subdivide and sell. Do we desire residential second home development, resort development and gated communities strewn across the landscape? Or do we, instead, choose to keep those lands in long-term timber production?

I know it isn’t perfect, but I’m using the phrase “Logs no lodges” to illustrate our options in rural forested landscapes such as the Swan Valley. And I come down squarely in favor of working forests.

On the environmental side of the equation, some would argue that current and future timber harvests will only continue to ratchet down the ecological values of the land, particularly for those plants and animals that depend upon mature forests and large patches of undisturbed land. I can’t dispute this point, particularly where those harvests involve putting in more permanent roads and converting the few remaining patches of mature forests left in the valley bottoms. But even a poor timber harvest has its merits over the wholesale conversion of the land, so standing on principles against such economic activity can have dire unintended consequences.

What we can not afford, at this juncture, are landowners feeling so frustrated about their inability to manage timber that they make the choice to cash in on the current development values and convert the forest once and for all. A better choice, it seems to me, is to help public and private landowners design ecologically sound and economically viable timber harvests.

On the timber side of the equation, some would argue that it is too difficult to manage forest lands in highly productive, low-elevation sites because those same areas are important to threatened and endangered species and they enjoy a high level of scrutiny from the public. Many in this camp blame the environmentalists and local residents as obstructionists at worst and NIMBYs at best. But as long as we don't treat working forests as enslaved forests, I believe these concerns will diminish over time.

If targets for acres per year, board feet per year, or dollars per year drive our decisions, we're sunk, but as long as forest managers, in places such as Swan Valley, have the flexibility to address the multiple values of their lands, timber will continue to be a wonderful byproduct of good land management.

Supporting working forests for the long haul does not mean ignoring the opportunities that exist for expanding development, and for that matter, expanding preservation. There are many acres that lend themselves to each of these outcomes. But the majority of what you drive through when you travel the backroads of western Montana can be protected through good, holistic land management that includes timber harvest. The places that you go with your family and camp along a creek just off a dirt road - those are the places I'm talking about.

So rather than coming out with a renewed battle cry against the latest timber sale, or against the latest environmental appeal, let's keep the big picture and the long haul in mind. Let's work together to find ways to invest in the restoration and long term protection of our working forest landscape in western Montana so that we can maintain an economy that depends on stewarding the land, not converting it. By doing so, we can protect our waters, our wildlife and our culture.

*Melanie Parker of Condon, a member of the Missoula County Open Lands Citizen Advisory Committee, works in the family outfitting business and runs an environmental research and education service.*