

Early history of the Forest Stewards Guild

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People often ask me what makes the Forest Stewards Guild unique. My first response is that the organization is values-based. Many groups are oriented towards a specific goal or activity. On the other hand, membership in the Forest Guild starts with a personal identification with the values imbedded in the “statement of principles”. Acknowledging these values in the membership application process is the line-in-the-sand for Guild members. In reading over those principles, either you see yourself as a Guild member or clearly, you do not.

The Guild’s roots go back to the work of the Forest Trust which I founded in 1984 as a traditional forest conservation organization based in the rural communities and public lands of northern New Mexico. Throughout the early years of the Trust, I felt something was missing in the institutional landscape, nationally. Foresters who saw their principal mission as the care and tending of the forest were not represented. The idea for an alternative organization for professional foresters first emerged outside of Washington, D.C. in the early 1980’s. Doug Henderson, a colleague and I had just attended a meeting of the Society of American Foresters where we both felt desperately out of place. We started to dream about creating an alternative to the existing associations of professional foresters – an organization that would focus on maintaining the natural character of the forest.

At a conference on sustainable forestry some years later, I observed that the discussion was dominated by “policy wonks” – professionals who were fully credentialed but did not represent the practical, place-based knowledge necessary to the actual practice of sustainable forestry. Again, I felt the need for an alternative association.

The idea went no further until in 1994, the Pew Charitable Trusts, wanting to encourage cultural change within the forestry community, hosted a small meeting of “progressive” foresters. Coming out of this meeting, the Pew Trusts made a small grant to the Forest Trust to explore the notion of forming a network of progressive foresters.

The Trust had some experience with creating new networks for previously isolated professionals. In 1990, with the encouragement of the Ford Foundation we brought together a group of rural development practitioners working in forested communities. After months of calling around the country, we located roughly twenty organizations using similar approaches to creating economic opportunities in remote communities. Each believed they were the only ones. The first meeting sparked a “eureka” moment as the participants discovered their community. This group went on to form the National Network of Forest Practitioners.

With the progressive foresters, we started with the same technique of calling around the country, spearheaded by Steve Harrington. We quickly discovered that we had to

drop the term “progressive”. No forester wanted to be defined as anything other than progressive. Regressive? Other adjectives didn’t prove any more helpful. Good foresters? Foresters practicing sustainable forestry? No forester wanted to be identified as practicing unsustainable forestry.

Then we hit on the idea of first trying to identify exceptionally well managed forests. No problem there. We found consensus focused on several forests around the country. The next step was to identify the foresters behind those well managed forests. Again, no problem. The foresters emerged like gems between the trees. Thirty-six of those attended our first meeting in Santa Fe on December 1, 1995.

In 1995, we were in the midst of the timber wars. Discussions of forestry practices tended to be highly polarized and contentious. Called upon to open the meeting and facing 35 participants from around the country, I had only the faintest intuition of how to launch. I started with my own experience in forestry school. I told of my disbelief when in my first silviculture class I learned that the way to “regenerate” a forest was to clearcut it. I told of my feelings of alienation working for the Forest Service and in professional meetings. I defined myself as a “long haired forester”, spending days and months on the land, listening to nature. Bill Howe from Collins Pine who followed me in the introductions couldn’t have looked more different – you might say, a buzz cut forester. My knees shook. But the story he told was remarkably similar – a kind recounting of shared impressions. And so on around the table. All shared common values, experiences and feelings. It was solemn, it was electric, it was what you might call a holy moment: to find such strong commonalities where we might have expected conflict. That was the “spark” that continues to bring Guild members together year after year.