

Stewardship of old forests & trees

Forest stewards must be cognizant that there is no single recipe for success, and that context matters.

Background

This Position Statement supports the stewardship of old forests and trees with a view to maintaining and expanding their acreage, ecological function, societal benefit, and cultural value. For a more detailed discussion of the Guild's perspective and scientific citations, please see the extended version of this document, coming soon. The Guild has led discussions of old forests since our founding in 1995 (for example, the [Silviculture for Natural Forests Policy Statement](#)). We believe that efforts to protect, conserve, and steward old forests are aided by working with a broad coalition with diverse values. These efforts should focus on a shared goal – protecting and expanding old-growth forests and trees for the benefit and dignity of all communities that value them – and build partnerships to continuously search for and apply excellent forestry practices.

Stewardship

The Guild recognizes the broad ecological diversity, goals, and uses of forests (see the Guild position statement on [Full Spectrum of Forest Management](#)). We emphasize stewardship of forests, which means reciprocal care, investment, mutual support, and long-term commitment. Stewardship can include protection, harvesting of forest products, recreation, restoration, or other practices. Proper stewardship of old forests requires place-based understanding of the unique landscape, local ecological dynamics, cultural history, social pressures, community needs, and resources. Indigenous stewardship has often been excluded from this context, but we acknowledge that old-growth forests have often been shaped by Indigenous stewardship.

Mature and Old-Growth Forests

We define an old-growth forest as one dominated by big, old trees, both living and dead, standing and fallen, and usually containing other smaller trees. Within this definition, ecological differences in productivity, species, and disturbances create unique trajectories in stand development. Mature forests have characteristics and structural elements that are lacking in earlier stages of forest development, but do not yet have all the attributes of old-growth forests.

The presence of old forests is now far below historical levels; in some regions, studies suggest that the current area of old-growth is only about 10% of its precolonial extent. This scarcity

makes the remaining old-growth forests highly valuable, as they play important roles in critical ecological processes (for example, the Guild's [Forest Conservation and Connectivity](#) Position Statement). Old-growth forests are also valued resources for tribal communities, who rely on them for sustenance and spiritual and cultural identity.

Old forests also play a critical role in climate mitigation and adaptation (see the Guild's Policy Statement on [Climate Change](#) and Position Statement on [Climate Smart Forestry](#)). Old forests hold more carbon than younger forests and typically sequester carbon at a greater rate per-acre as they age than younger forests. If lost, these carbon pools are irrecoverable.

Threats to Old Forests

Old-growth forests face threats including wildfires, changing climate, conversion to other uses, and invasion by non-native species. Old-growth forests do not exist in a static state and have always been impacted by disturbances. Disturbances will continue to affect old-growth forests, but because of past extractive practices and new pressures, old forests in many parts of the country may be at 'tipping point,' where their area on the landscape is at risk of falling below critical thresholds needed to support essential ecological, social and cultural functions.

Stewardship for Old Forests

The Guild advocates for the conservation of remaining old-growth forests and old trees, and the restoration and acceleration of old forest conditions in depleted areas. Long-term planning is critical to these goals, which may include designated wildernesses, roadless areas, and late seral reserves on public lands, and maintenance of old forests through conservation easements or other protection on private lands. Individual old trees should also be protected where feasible.

Given the limited and threatened supply of old-growth forests, accelerating the development of old forest characteristics is critical to restoring landscape functionality. Silvicultural interventions can accelerate the development of old forest characteristics in younger forests, but specific interventions must be based on local ecology and place-based experience.

Conclusion

The Guild understands that old-growth forests provoke passion and interest, and we share that passion. While supportive of protecting old-growth forests, maintaining and increasing old forests across the country is not a simple matter of protection versus harvest. Stewardship to reduce stressors on old forests and to accelerate old forest conditions in maturing forests is essential. Forest stewards must be cognizant that there is no single recipe for success, and that context matters. The Guild is convinced that a combination of good science, expert practice, monitoring, and adaptation will foster the conservation and expansion of old forests.

