

New England Botanical Society

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Changing Nature of the Maine Woods* by Andrew M. Barton, Alan S. White and Charles V. Cogbill

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BOOK REVIEW

The Changing Nature of the Maine Woods by Andrew M. Barton, Alan S. White, and Charles V. Cogbill. 2012. 304 pp. illus. ISBN 978-1-58465-832-0 \$29.95 (paper); 978-1-61168-295-3 \$27.99 (ebook). University of New Hampshire Press, Durham, NH.

In the year 1600, the landscape now known as the Maine Woods was unbroken. Forest cover was effectively 100 percent, just as it had been for more than ten thousand years. By 1900, forest cover had declined by more than thirty percent and two million hectares of new farmland struggled to sustain an influx of European settlers. Most of the farms were not up to the task and were eventually abandoned. In their wake, forest cover rebounded to more than 90 percent. Today, Maine's status as the most forested state in the nation is secure. Nonetheless, as in all New England states, the trajectory has again turned downward. This time, the Maine Woods are giving way to exurban sprawl creeping up from the south and to second homes that are perforating the north.

This record of forest loss, recovery, and renewed threat is familiar to those of us who are interested in the northeastern landscape. It is the central narrative through which we see the region. Of course, the full history of the land is far more nuanced and, in many ways, far more interesting. The natural and cultural history of Maine has, by and large, occurred within all that forest cover. Fortunately, that is the focus of a new book, *The Changing Nature of the Maine Woods*, by Andrew Barton, Alan White, and Charles Cogbill. Students of the land and lovers of New England (and of Maine in particular) will delight in this book. There are other books about the Maine landscape, but none quite like this. It straddles convenient classification: it is neither a textbook nor is it popular science writing; it is told by a single voice (Barton's), except where particular expertise is needed (White's and Cogbill's); it is both a historical and ecological review; and it presents new data and several new analyses.

The Changing Nature of the Maine Woods covers a lot of a territory, from deep history as told through fossil pollen grains, to climate projections into the twenty-second century. It is an achievement, therefore, that the storyline remains clear and

accessible throughout. The book is structured around five big questions which, save for the fourth question about spatial variability, follow a chronology from bedrock formation to scenarios for Maine's future.

The first question, "How did the land and forests of Maine form and change over geologic time?" is topically the broadest and, therefore, is the most difficult to synthesize while maintaining an accessible tone. To their credit, the authors keep the story moving by toggling between colorful anecdotes from the field and paradigmatic recitations reminiscent of freshman earth science (think "Intro to Plate Tectonics and Milankovitch Cycles 101"). This fluctuating style—interspersing story with science—along with the liberal use of interesting sidebars, is an effective strategy, used throughout the book, to assemble mountains of information into a single narrative without devolving into a general textbook.

The second question the authors address is, "What were the forests like before European settlement?" This is the best chapter in the book. Compared to the first, this question is tightly defined, which allows the authors to engage meaningfully with the topic. Here, the book tacks from a stock but interesting natural history to a deep synthesis as told by scholars with unparalleled perspective. Again interspersing personal anecdotes from their careers as landscape detectives, the authors describe the structure and composition of the unbroken Maine Woods, *circa* 1600. By weaving multiple lines of evidence—observations from early explorers on the coast, previously unpublished colonial land surveys, and the references to witness trees therein, pollen and other fossil plant parts preserved in lake mud, and examinations of remnant old growth stands—the authors present the authoritative account of Maine's pre-colonial landscape. This is fascinating and important scholarship in its own right, and it will also serve as a valuable benchmark for conservationists considering landscape scale restoration.

It is probably worth noting here that Barton et al. pay little attention to the influence of Native Americans on Maine's forests. The authors state that (pp. 51–52), "compared to other areas...the number of Indians was relatively small...and their ecological effects on forests relatively less intense and widespread." Although I am in no position to quibble, I expect that some might.

The thorough reconstruction of the pre-settlement forests sets the stage for the third question: "How did human culture transform

Maine's forests?" Here, we learn of the escalating changes to the land that accompanied the first wave of settlement, from 1600 to 1840, including: agricultural conversion, the export of large white pine for ship masts, the numerous tanneries and their hunger for hemlock, and the other demands on Maine's forests, principally along the coast. The effects of these varied land-uses were subsequently dwarfed by the onslaught of lumbering and clearing that came next. Not since deglaciation had the landscape changed so much and so fast. Increased regional demand and improved logging technology (e.g., cross cut saws and railroads) pushed harvesting into the interior. The boom continued until around 1880, when the Civil War and other causes for outmigration slowed the cut. For the next century, forestry was centralized and mechanized; today, it remains central to the state's economy but it is balanced, in part, by increasing tourism and conservation. The chapter concludes with a fascinating comparison of the pre-settlement forests to the 2010 condition. As we know, forest cover has largely rebounded. So it is a stark lesson to see the dramatic changes within the forest cover in terms of composition and structure. Whereas fully one quarter of the landscape was older than 300 years in 1600, scant pockets of old growth remain today.

To answer their fourth question, "How and why do forests vary across the state?" the authors depart from the chronology that has structured the book to this point. Like the first chapter, this question is expansive and thus requires a more shallow treatment. Maine is a big place with varied environments. Here, we learn a little bit about most of these environments, plus a little bit about the science of ecological classification. Again, it is the sidebars and personal anecdotes that sustain the reader.

The fifth and final question, "What will Maine forests be like in the year 2100?" delves into several facets of global change and how they are affecting the state. This chapter nominally returns to the book's chronology but, again, this question is wide-ranging and, since this time we are looking into the future, the answer is uncertain. The chapter touches on everything from acid rain to invasive species, from projected residential home development to the causes and consequences of climate change. It is a lot to cover in forty or so pages. Because it is an issue so associated with the Maine Woods, I was most engaged by this chapter's discussion of land tenure and land use dynamics within the vast industrial holdings and the perverse incentives driving the cutting and selling behavior

of timber investment management organizations (TIMOs) and real estate investment trusts (REITs). Despite the broad scope of topics, the authors do an admirable job of wading through these murky and often dismal waters.

Overall, *The Changing Nature of the Maine Woods* is deeply informative. It is at its best when it delves deeply into the history and idiosyncrasies of the Maine landscape and when the authors relay their many adventures and discoveries that make them so expertly qualified to author this book.

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