

Valuing the Forests for the Trees

An Oregon forest keeper practices alternatives

By Dan Sadowsky
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To understand Peter Hayes' commitment to an improved model of forestry, look no further than the three-quarter-acre patch of Oregon White Oak at the edge of his family's 550 forested acres atop Mt. Richmond, an hour's drive southwest of Portland.

This is where Hayes, a fifth-generation woodsman who's spent most of his adult life as an educator in Seattle, has given roughly a dozen oaks room to grow by cutting down competing Douglas Fir, the most prevalent and marketable timber in western Oregon.



Ned, Ben and Peter Hayes stand amidst the working forest of Hyla Woods.

"Most people do the opposite," Hayes says, a mischievous grin crossing his tanned face. But he kept the gangly oaks to promote species diversity, retain habitat for the 30-odd bird varieties found here and cultivate a local market for the native hardwood. In recent months he's sold three truckloads of oak lumber, most of which he milled and dried in the forest, to be made into countertops, floors and furniture by local customers.

Through efforts like these, Hayes has emerged as a local spokesman for creating forestry alternatives that recognize what he calls "high conservation value forestry." These markets reward forest owners for "ecosystem services" like preserving wildlife habitat, storing carbon and keeping waterways cool and clean. And they're essential to allowing small woodlands owners like him to grow forests that are both ecologically complex and economically viable.

"Right now, the world seems to say you can do one or the other," says Hayes, a youthful-looking 50-year-old who grew up in Portland. "And there won't be opportunities for landowners to do both unless we change the nature of our markets."

Together with his wife Pam and forester Mike Barnes, Hayes manages 780 forested acres that his parents assembled in the mid-1980s. The land, known collectively as Hyla Woods, provides a chance for them to explore ways "to live on a piece of land without spoiling it," in the words of pioneering naturalist Aldo Leopold, one of Hayes' heroes.

To that end, Hyla Woods follows most of the forest management practices established by Hayes' father and by part-owner Barnes, who is certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) to manage forests that blend social, ecological and economic goals. They have placed even greater emphasis on ecological monitoring – inviting local Audubon Society members and others to inventory bird species, for example – and expanded their operation vertically by buying a \$30,000 mobile sawmill and building a solar-powered dry kiln onsite.

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The kiln has four compartments sized to match the annual growth rate of the forest's hardwoods, and is patterned after a model built by Wisconsin forester Jim Birkemeier. Birkemeier is a leading proponent of "full vigor forestry," which calls for sustainable forest management, in-house processing and marketing wood directly to the public.

In that same spirit, Hyla Woods has sold firewood, oak floors and lumber, maple countertops, fir beams and high-quality trim to some of the 160-plus people who've become "members" of the operation. Hayes says offering symbolic membership is a way of building mutually beneficial linkages between growers and consumers, much like community-supported agriculture does. Hyla Woods invites people to explore the forests, help them mill logs and celebrate events like the annual return of Coho salmon to one of the forest streams on the site.

"I'm still an educator at heart, and I love the idea of having people come out and get a visceral connection to the forest," Hayes says.

Hayes has also joined a larger effort to link forest owners with Portland-area consumers by co-founding the Build Local Alliance with an environmentally minded Portland homebuilder, Stephen Aiguier. Today several dozen builders, millers, land stewards and lumberyards meet regularly to brainstorm ways to make it easier for what's grown in the region's FSC-certified forests to make it into the hands of local builders and other wood users.

Opening new – and higher value – markets for local logs has broad ramifications for the state's small woodland owners. An estimated 40,000 families own roughly half of Oregon's eight million acres of privately held forest. With land values escalating and log prices tied to increasingly globalized commodity markets, many of these aging landowners – their average age is 65 – worry about generating enough timber income to keep their lands forested, says Mike Gaudern, director of the 2,900-member Oregon Small Woodlands Association.

"If they don't see an economic benefit from an actively managed forest, and support from public to do the right thing," their heirs are likely to sell off or develop the land, Gaudern says. For that reason alone, "We need to be at the cutting edge of market development."

Can a market emerge for the century-old Oregon White Oak trees sprinkled amidst the Douglas Firs on Mt. Richmond? Current demand, as well as local milling capacity, is minimal. But Hayes hopes to build on his recent sales. He guesstimates that Hyla Woods made five times as much money selling cut-and-dried oak boards into high-value local markets – including some for countertops in Portland's newest waterfront condos – than if they had sold the raw logs to local mills.

"Still, it is a gamble," Hayes admits. "But if we can earn a reputation among local wood users, we could develop the basis for a business that could improve the economics of the forest." And the payoffs are not only healthier forests, but healthier choices for those who grow forests and those who consume what the forests produce.