Human communities are like ecosystems. They are dynamic, and they adapt to changes in their surroundings. Just as we must exchange myths of stable ecosystems for theories of disturbance ecology, so we must abandon romantic images of rural places and adopt complex and dynamic representations. Sociologists have long represented communities in terms of three attributes: place, networks, and identity. Political transformations appear to have made identity and network more salient attributes than place.

The decline in modern liberalism, with its emphasis on mutual adjustment, bargaining, negotiation, and compromise, may be as important to rural communities as changes in economic conditions. Sociologists use the term “postmodern” to describe a society that is losing the faith in reason and science that emerged with the Enlightenment. Public forest policy epitomized modernity. What could be more representative of the modern faith in science and rationality than the national forest planning models of the 1970s and 1980s? Scientific facts could be separated from social values. All values were commensurable, and could be reduced to an economic equivalent by dumping them into the FORPLAN blender. Bargaining and compromise among competing stakeholders eventually resulted in the adoption of forest plans acceptable to regional publics. But, as we know, these plans were soon superseded by the Northwest Forest Plan. How and why did this happen?

The simplest answer is that these forest plans were adopted when liberal democracy was in decline in the United States. A crisis of public faith in the efficacy of reason, science, and political bargaining and compromise was registered as a sense of loss—a loss of the integrating center previously provided by civic discourse and local, state, and national politics. A loss of center was accompanied by recognition of relativity in values and the emergence of moral pluralism. Many people found it difficult to accept diverse moral claims of ethnic identification, gender, sexual orientation, environmental appreciation, and religion. Sociologists have noted that such people have a tendency to embrace fundamentalist beliefs when faced with the void created by moral relativism. Fundamentalism has become one of the most important organizing forces affecting rural communities throughout the United States.

In rural America, two competing fundamentalisms have become new “centers” for re-asserting identity and forming relationships with others who share this identity: Christian fundamentalism and environmental fundamentalism. Christian fundamentalism is best described as modern expression of Gnosticism, in which salvation is attained through knowledge—a claim to special, mystical knowing. Environmental fundamentalism is best described as a faith in the self-regulating power of undisturbed nature, in which human kind will be saved by the protection and restoration of naturally functioning ecosystems. These competing fundamentalisms increasingly give rise to parallel social worlds and segmented social networks that are seldom integrated by common place of residence in rural settlements.

The Northwest Forest Plan emerged from a political climate in which the protection and restoration of forest ecosystems was an exclusive and unquestioned value commitment. This value commitment directed the selection of facts to build “science-based plans.” Residents in rural places adversely affected by the resulting drastic reductions in federal timber supplies experienced a loss in faith in efficacy of liberal politics, and sought a more efficacious “center” for their lives. Christian fundamentalism was there to provide many with meaning and purpose, while a minority of others turned to environmentalism or other beliefs. The unfortunate few escaped the disintegration of meaning in their lives with substance abuse, family chaos, or other nihilistic pursuits.

People living in rural communities in forested regions will continue to adapt to external political and economic changes. We cannot predict these changes. But we can construct scenarios and then guess at what could happen. Three questions suggest possible scenarios: (1) Will science become increasingly politicized and lose much of its effectiveness as an arbiter of factual claims about environmental issues? (2) Will political compromise remain elusive, bringing about the spatial segregation of people with different basic beliefs and lifestyles? (3) Will
the federal government resort to a more theocratic stance in an attempt to promote moral consensus? Answers to these and other questions will shape the future adaptations of people in rural communities.

SYNTHESIS REPORT- Social, Economic & Human Dimensions

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