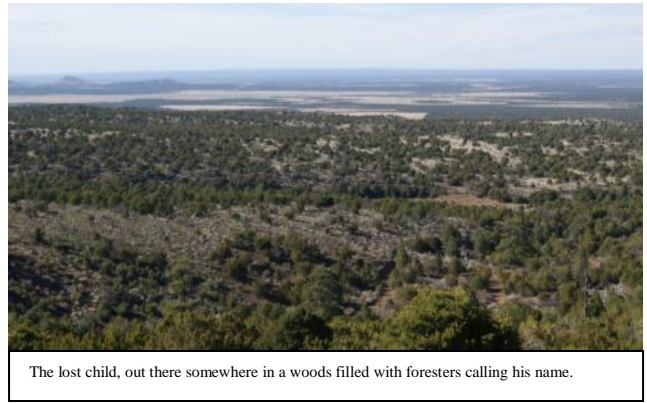


Forester's Log: Hunting for Wesley

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The Forester's Log is a monthly column published in newspapers and magazines primarily in the American west. Stuever is a forester in the American Southwest. She can be reached at mary@foresterslog.com.



"I've lost my son, can you help me?"

The frantic woman approaches our large group near the trail head of Red Mountain, outside of Flagstaff, Arizona. She has a baby on her chest and van load of other children. About fifty of us are looking at dead pinyon trees—bark beetle victims from several years previously. Our next stop includes troubled aspen. None of that seems important compared to the loss of a five year old. We spread out across the mountain, calling the child's name, grateful for the opportunity to stretch our legs, see some country, and hopefully find the lad.

"Wesley." The name echoes among the searchers.

It is day one of a week-long conference on forests and climate. Assembled in northern Arizona from across the United States and Canada, we are mostly foresters ready to learn about the potential impacts of changing climate on our forest. The field trip includes areas recently devastated by fires, tornados, disease and insects. Are these events indicating a changing climate? Or is this business as usual in a messy forest ecosystem?

"Wes- ley.Wes- ley." Where is that kid?

We are pretty spread out now. We are not an organized search and rescue crew, but we represent years of woods experience. We are also accustomed to responding to emergencies. I reflect on my own job as an American forester. It's not usual that my plan for the day is set aside to respond to some pressing issue—a wildfire or flash flood or some development on a project in the field that needs my immediate attention. This change in our itinerary isn't that different from a normal work day. However, with increasing climate fluctuations, our careers may focus even more on emergency management.

"Wes-ley.Wes-ley." Stop. Listen. Wait for an answer. Move on.

Over the next few days we will concentrate on listening. The agenda includes many of the nation's experts on the challenges that changing climate conditions pose to forests and foresters. We will consider the impact of drier winters, earlier springs, hotter summers, and longer autumns. The biggest challenge though may be extreme events: fires, floods, winds, and frosts that transform landscapes overnight. We will learn that long-range trends may move species hundreds of miles north. We'll work with models, predictions, and estimates of uncertainty. The only certain thing is that no action is our worst action.

"Wes- ley." How long have we been looking? Thirty minutes? Forty-five? Will we find this kid?

It seems like a little preparation is a good thing. Does the kid have a whistle? Where was his buddy? Does he know that if he is lost he should stay in one place and wait for help? Preparation is the key to facing climate changes too. Hopefully we won't face the extreme, but it's better to be prepared in case we do. Proposed reactions are described using five categories that start with the letter "R": *Resistance, Resilience, Response, Realignment, and Reduce*. The appropriate actions escalate as needed, starting with projects that insure healthy forests that are resistant to extreme weather events, insect outbreaks, or wildfire. On the other end of the scale, forests shift on the landscape, changing species or even becoming grasslands.

"Wes- ley.Wes- ley." The name echoes all around me.

It is a comfort not to be alone in this quest. I am scaling a ridge now, but I can see some foresters in the canyon below me and others on the ridge across the way. We are all together in this search for the child. I may not find the kid, but I am confident that one of us will. We may not find the answers to preparing our forests to weather extreme events right away either. In the next few days we will be urged to make mistakes—to keep adapting our actions based on our results. What really counts is that we communicate our successes and our failures.

"He's been found." The jubilant yell moves from searcher to searcher across the mountain side.

We each find the trail and head back to the bus. We are excited. We want the story. "Really, he found us," one of the rescuers explained. "We were contemplating heading back to re-group, and we just stayed still long enough that he was able to follow our voices." Persistence has paid off. Mother and child are re-united. We can only hope for such success over the long run in our forests.