



Recent Work from The Sustainable Wood Production Initiative

Visual Resource Management and Sustainable Forestry

Gordon Bradley



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Can We See the Forest for the Trees?

Gordon Bradley and cooperators at the Capitol State Forest have been examining visual preferences for different forest treatments. Essentially, the research asks: what kinds of forest treatments do different groups of people prefer, and what qualities about those treatments influence their perceptions? The basic method is to show people images of forest treatments—either photographs or more recently, computer-generated images—and ask them to rate scenes on a preference scale. Previous research indicated that the greener the treatment, the higher the preference. Differences in groups of people were also evident, with foresters having a higher preference than all other groups (environmentalists, educators, and the general public) for more actively-managed treatments such as patch cuts and clearcuts. The implication for these findings is that to gain public trust for forest management treatments, managers will need to consider the visual impact of their activities. This research provides managers with information about forest treatments that are not visually unpleasant. In many cases, a forest that is aesthetically pleasing also provides benefits for other values such as fish and wildlife habitat, and clean water.

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Gordon Bradley gives an outdoor presentation on visual preferences research.

Photo by Charlie Peterson, USFS.

New Methods for Visualization

This research has been ongoing, and currently Bradley has completed four rounds of surveys including a new survey using computer images from the program Envision. This latter survey is in cooperation with Bob McGaughey, the creator of Envision. Because of the need to control for external conditions like light, time of day, and vantage point and because the range of forest conditions through greenup is not always fully represented in real forests, Bradley and McGaughey teamed up to create a fuller spectrum to use in the surveys. “When I give presentations about the Capitol Forest work,” says Bradley, “I



Image provided by Bob McGaughey, USFS.

This computer-generated image of a forest landscape was created by using Envision. By using these images, survey participants had a broader and more consistent range of images to respond to.

always get asked, ‘What is the threshold of forest thinning that people find unattractive?’ Well, we created those images.” Now Bradley and McGaughey can start to answer this question. Initially, it appears that 75 to 85 percent tree removal starts to become a problem for the general public.

The Theory Behind Visual Preference

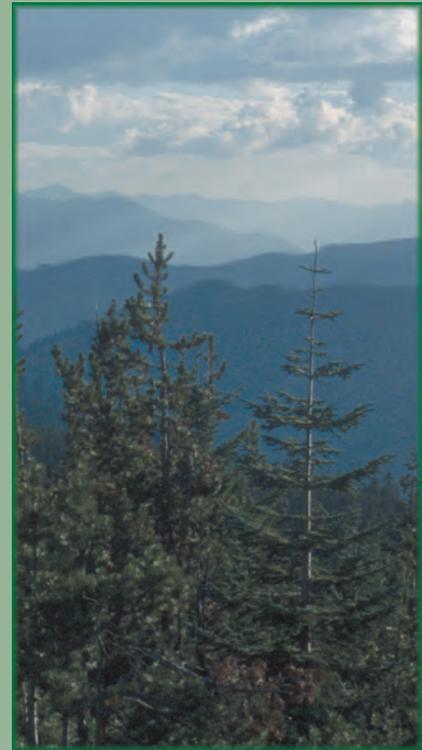
Are visual preferences an esoteric topic? According to Bradley, they are not. “The industry itself has incorporated these concepts into its standards,” says Bradley. “This work is providing the science behind it.” Weyerhaeuser, an industry giant, is already using these concepts in its public relations, as evidenced by a recent watercolor depiction of a forest scene appearing in national news media. The image, according to Bradley, draws from the fundamental theories of perception and includes all the elements of the “visual preference matrix.” This concept relates to composition of the image and how people might see themselves in the scene. Bradley’s latest survey was designed to capture these elements. According to Bradley, “Beauty may be in the eyes of the beholder, but we all share a common perception of what is attractive in the forest. With this kind of

information, it’s possible to do something about it.” In short, this research shows there is in fact a “science” behind people’s visual preferences.

References

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Photo—Courtesy of Erik Ackerson

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