Old Growth Is Where You Find It

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Eastern Old Growth Notes

Holyoke Community College professor Gary Beluzo and I are in the process of conducting an "official" inventory of old growth sites on lands managed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management (DEM). We are mapping the boundaries of each site, recommending buffer areas, and building a multi-purpose GIS database for use by the state and research institutions like Harvard University's Harvard Forest. We have until December 2001 to complete the work. Our project will support the existing old-growth protection policy, promulgated by DEM, and pending legislation, and is motivated by our desire to provide a more permanent level of protection for the old growth. The Massachusetts Audubon Society is the driving force behind the legislation. Gary's and my mission is to make an intensive search to find any residual old-growth stands that heretofore were missed. As we map, we identify the major species growing on each site, establish formal study plots in the more significant sites, document exemplary features and specimens at all sites, take tree cores to determine average stand age, and rank the sites in terms of their relative ecological, historical, and aesthetic importance.

We are up to thirty-eight old-growth sites and will probably reach forty-five before our inventory is finished, possibly fifty. Neither of us views this project as a contest to bag old-growth sites, but given the amount of territory we have yet to cover, the predicted numbers are not only realistic, but virtually guaranteed. A decade ago, nobody I know, including me, would have thought that so many old-growth sites would have survived in populous Massachusetts. By 1996, I thought I had found them all. However, to keep the number of potential sites in perspective, their combined area will likely not exceed 1,500 acres out of the over 3,000,000 acres of forested lands in Massachusetts and over 5,000,000 of total land in Massachusetts. As a percentage of either figure, old growth in Massachusetts remains exceedingly rare. Even with this qualifier, the mounting number of individual sites is exciting. But how could so many old-growth stands have been missed? The simple truth is contradictory -- they were and they were not. This statement requires explaining.

An old-growth site on private property may be known locally to a few, but remain hidden from both public officials and determined old-growth sleuths for decades. Gary Beluzo, John Knuerr, and I were recently led to one of the best old-growth hemlock stands in the state, which none of us had previously seen. The stand is on private land and is not publicized. I'm told that a similar situation awaits us on our next visit to New Hampshire. Other examples could be cited. Some of these unpublicized old-growth pockets on private land are proving to be highly significant. The lesson I've learned is that the lack of publicity, either intentional or unintentional, has kept a surprising number of important old-

growth spots hidden from us. However, the private parcels are the lesser part of the story. There is a much larger, little tapped reserve of eastern old growth in non-commercial stands of stunted trees.

The search strategies we've used to identify potentially lucrative areas and the search images we've employed to spot old-growth candidates, at a distance, have missed an entire class of old growth – the non-commercial pockets lying on steep, dry slopes, on high mountain summits, and in wetlands. These places can be in full view of a major road. As a generalization, we can attribute their slipping through the cracks to our society's preoccupation with wood products – a point of view that settled in the collective consciousness well back in early colonial times. The no nonsense, utilitarian mindset of our ancestors induced a lasting bias toward forests as commercial resources and diverted attention from forested areas not suited to timber harvesting. This persistent bias was rudely shaken in the early 1990s when the "Lord of the Rings" himself, Dr. David Stahle, Director of the University of Arkansas's Tree Ring Laboratory, predicted that a large acreage of non-commercial old-growth forest had survived intact, and strongly admonished us to protect it. Dave and his doctoral candidate Matthew Therrell became the champions of the Cross Timbers community of western Arkansas and Missouri and eastern Oklahoma. I fell in love with the centuries-old post oak communities on a visit to the Frank tract in Oklahoma in October 1995.

But most of us doubted that Dave's old-growth predictive models could be applied broadly, and certainly not to the settled Northeast. Dave suspected otherwise, and he was right. The turnaround for me came upon my recognition of the stunted old-growth chestnut oak-pitch pine communities in the western Taconics, partly in New York, partly in Massachusetts. Then came the stunted northern red oak forests of Wachusett Mountain in central Massachusetts. Now we have old-growth pitch pine, scrub oak, gray birch communities on the exposed ridge top of Mount Everett to investigate with new eyes. Beyond this, Rick Van de Poll of Antioch New England Graduate School is opening the door to fire-successional communities on the central New England monadnocks. All these jewels include the historically important species *Pinus rigida* (pitch pine), and the pine communities are diverse.

Mount Everett is a large dome-shaped peak on the eastern side of the Taconics in southwestern Massachusetts. Its modest 2,608-foot height belies its visual impressiveness and dominance of the surrounding countryside. Everett rises abruptly from the lowlands of the Housatonic River to the east. The base to summit rise is almost 2,000 vertical feet. Mount Everett (or the Dome) is a genuine mountain. More to the point of this article, the rounded summit of Mount Everett harbors a non-commercial old-growth forest that until Dr. Paul Van Deusen sounded the alarm had gone unrecognized. The mountain's summit is subject to extremes of climate, and as a result, a fascinating vegetative community has evolved that includes cohorts of dwarf pitch pine scattered within a thick cover of scrub oak. The community is of unknown origin. References to "yellow pine" on the summit date back to at least 1839. Residents do not recall any fires on the mountain top, and the successional nature of the forest community there speaks to this. Today, northern red oak and gray birch have penetrated the scrub oak and pitch pine along with nine other sparsely represented tree species and five or six shrubs. Blueberries are prolific.

The pitch pine community at the summit of Everett is precariously balanced. The Appalachian Trail crosses the summit and, unfortunately, hikers and casual visitors tend to amble off trail. The community is sensitive to human disturbance. Young pitch pines take root in the cracks of rock and snake along the surface like krumholtz, but since they are young trees they can be easily damaged by being stepped on. The mature pines are 4 to 10 feet tall and their gnarled, twisted forms are exquisitely artistic. The pines form a natural bonsai forest, although a dynamic one. At present, we are guessing

that the Mount Everett pitch pines got their start perhaps 200 years ago. In time, and with the help of Harvard Forest's paleo-ecologists like Dr. David Orwig and Glenn Motzkin, we shall know more.

Apart from trampling by hikers, the pitch pines are potentially threatened by another source. The state, which owns the summit and a good portion of the slopes of Mount Everett, plans to refurbish the old fire tower and to install telecommunications equipment on the summit. This has local protectors of the mountain like Eleanor Tillinghast, her husband Morgan Bulkeley, and other residents of the town of Mount Washington worried. As part of their efforts to protect the mountain, Eleanor Tillinghast and others have been researching the origins of the forest. There are local oral histories of Indian terraces on the mountain. So far, the material is all anecdotal, but the possibilities are promising. There is a good chance that Mount Everett was used, perhaps extensively, by the Mohican Nation of Native Americans, featured in the writings of James Fenimore Cooper. Mount Everett was Mohican territory. Many people in the small town of Mount Washington, Massachusetts are passionate about protecting their mountain, and rightly so. Its treasures are many, and not limited to the pitch-pine community on the summit. The eastern slopes of Mount Everett harbor ancient hemlocks that Tad Zebryk and I dated back in the early 1990s to over 350 years, yellow birch to approximately 300 years, black birch to over 210, and white pine to over 250. We were surprised to find growing on the lower slopes some of the state's finest native tulip poplars. I had read or heard nothing about those trees.

My familiarity with the eastern slopes of Mount Everett does not come from a casual visit or two. On at least a dozen occasions, I have followed the contours around Everett, frequently becoming entangled in the thickets of mature mountain laurel. The physical difficulty of successfully penetrating the laurel is punctuated by thoughts about the whereabouts of possibly surviving rattlesnake colonies. In the laurel, every trunk and branch takes on the form of a snake.

A unique feature on Mount Everett is Guilder Pond, the largest upland body of water in the state. The pond is surrounded by a very mature forest, which lends something of an air of mystery to the surrounding region. One gets the distinct that in the distant past, the pond was an important, secretive place. Perhaps what is most visually obvious about Mount Everett is that it has not been degraded with the usual network of paved roads, parking lots, unsightly towers, slum-like campgrounds, and God forbid, the bane of all noble mountains – downhill ski operations. In fact, the mountain is as close to pristine as we have in Massachusetts. That great sister mountain to the north, Greylock, has not been as fortunate – all the more reason to protect Mount Everett. Yes, the Dome feels like holy ground and a growing number of us intend to see that it stays that way.[1]

[1] Robert T. Leverett, "Old Growth and Big Trees Are Where You Find Them," *Eastern Old-Growth Notes*, III, No. 3 (Fall 1999), 1.