
[USA: Losing forests to pine plantations](#)

The United States is also affected by the predatory scheme that is elsewhere replacing forests by monoculture tree plantations. In the state of Tennessee, the sorrow is also felt by those who know the peril behind the short-term profit driven projects.

A question is posed in central Tennessee, where giant timber-cutting machines shear native trees off Spencer Mountain: "If many trees are cut down in a forest, but others are planted to take their place, is it still a forest? Or is a forest something more elusive: a repository of varied life forms, a cradle for clear-running streams, a historical continuum where children and their fathers and grandfathers can sit atop old stumps, watch for squirrels and talk?"

The narrow approach that sees just trees in the forest, has neat accounts: clear-cutting tens of thousands trees is not a problem since more trees are grown than they are cut. By mid-century, trees may well cover more ground than they do today in Tennessee.

The nation's appetite for computer paper, chipboard and other consumer products is altering US landscapes from Georgia to Arkansas and consuming the region's slow-growing oaks, hickories and other hardwoods, replacing them by a sterile substitute: vast pine tree plantations mainly of a single species, the fast-sprouting loblolly (*Pinus taeda*), which can be harvested by machine and replaced with seedlings in as little as 25 years, two to five times faster than the regrowth of a traditional forest. The loblolly stands are fertilised and managed and devoid of many native plants and animals, and are grown in rows, mostly the same age, the same height and cut at the same time by giant machines.

They are far from a real forest, which is something more messy, primal and elusive --a place to learn not just about nature and hunting but about the world of your ancestors.

According to a recent U.S. Forest Service report, the amount of southern land devoted to pine plantations will increase 67 percent to 54 million acres --an area the size of Utah-- by 2040. Forests of all types will decline 17 percent, meanwhile, with the most dramatic conversion occurring in Tennessee.

Barry Graden, forestry development manager for Bowater Inc., one of Tennessee's largest timber companies, is proud of his new "forests." He shows off a stand of young, green loblollies, saying they provide nesting habitat for quail, shelter for deer, wild turkeys and rabbits, easy foraging for hawks and eagles. But Graden and other forest experts concede that when planted loblollies grow taller, the sunlight dims and creatures disperse. "As the canopy closes on a planted pine stand, that diversity will drop off rather substantially," said David Wear, co-author of the above mentioned US Forest Service report.

The conversion to plantations has been going on for half a century. But the process accelerated in the past two decades as Fortune 500 timber companies moved away from the Northwest to the friendlier regulatory atmosphere of the South. Most Southern forests are privately owned and immune

from the environmental restrictions imposed on the federal forests of the West.

Unlike California, most Southern states do not require timber companies that cut trees on private land to draw up plans to protect wildlife and water quality. Today's pine plantations flourish on abandoned farms in southern Appalachia, Florida grasslands and in the coastal lowlands of the Carolinas.

Around Spencer Mountain and elsewhere in rural Van Buren County, neon green swaths of non-native loblollies intermingle with the brown bark of hardwoods. Thin bands of trees called beauty strips still line the roads, masking the clear-cuts beyond.

"They hurt this mountain out here," said William Bouldin, 84, whose father taught him to cut trees one at a time. "It ain't nothing but a pile of brush."