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Forest Agism: How the Young Forest Movement Greenwashes Logging



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[conservation](#), [forest management](#), [logging](#), [old growth forests](#)



Agism is discrimination based on age. It is usually directed against the elderly, and results from a culture that values youth above wisdom and experience. Despite being a flawed philosophy, it's easy to understand how the fear of mortality would create the urge to "fight aging." But if you think extending agist thinking to trees is ridiculous – well, you'd be right. That isn't stopping some interest groups from capitalizing on our obsession with youth to make it easier to clearcut mature forests before they grow old enough to qualify for protection.

The Circle of Life

Sometimes people think of forests as timeless places. But in nature, change is the only constant. Forests progress through predictable stages of development. The four developmental phases of [forest succession](#) are stand initiation, stem

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exclusion, understory reinitiation, and steady state. ^{CLOSE} Like people, forests develop at their own pace, which can vary widely depending on forest type and climate. Unlike people, forests spend decades or even centuries moving through each stage of development.

- **Stand initiation** takes place after a disturbance, for example, when a grove of trees has burned down. Environmental change creates the conditions that will allow forest species to become established in a new area.
- During **stem exclusion**, shrubs and fast-growing trees crowd and shade themselves out.
- During **understory reinitiation**, species composition shifts. Species that thrive in the new conditions created by the pioneer species come to dominate.
- **Steady state** occurs when first-generation dominants die off, leaving the upper canopy to succession species that can reproduce in the mature forest. “Steady state” may be a misnomer, however, as the forest is itself part of a much longer **ecological succession** cycle.



It can take up to 20 years for young forests to compensate for the carbon released through soil disturbance from logging.

Twisted Science

Mature forests are the climax of a cycle that can take hundreds of years to complete and human disturbances can interrupt that cycle forever. Recognizing this, the U.S. and Canada have established protections for **old-growth forests**. But there is no universally **agreed-upon definition** for “old growth.”

Scientists originally used it to describe complex, biodiverse forests at least 150 years old. Today, many environmentalists use old growth to refer to any forest that has never been logged. Legally, in **British Columbia, Canada**, 250-year-old trees in coastal forests qualify as old growth. But 140-year-old trees qualify inland. The U.S. protects trees over 21 inches in diameter in six national forests, but trees of this size in many public and all privately-owned forests are not protected.

For any given forest type, the number and composition of species will be different at each stage of development. **Often, but not always**, biodiversity is highest during forest initiation, when the young forest has many characteristics

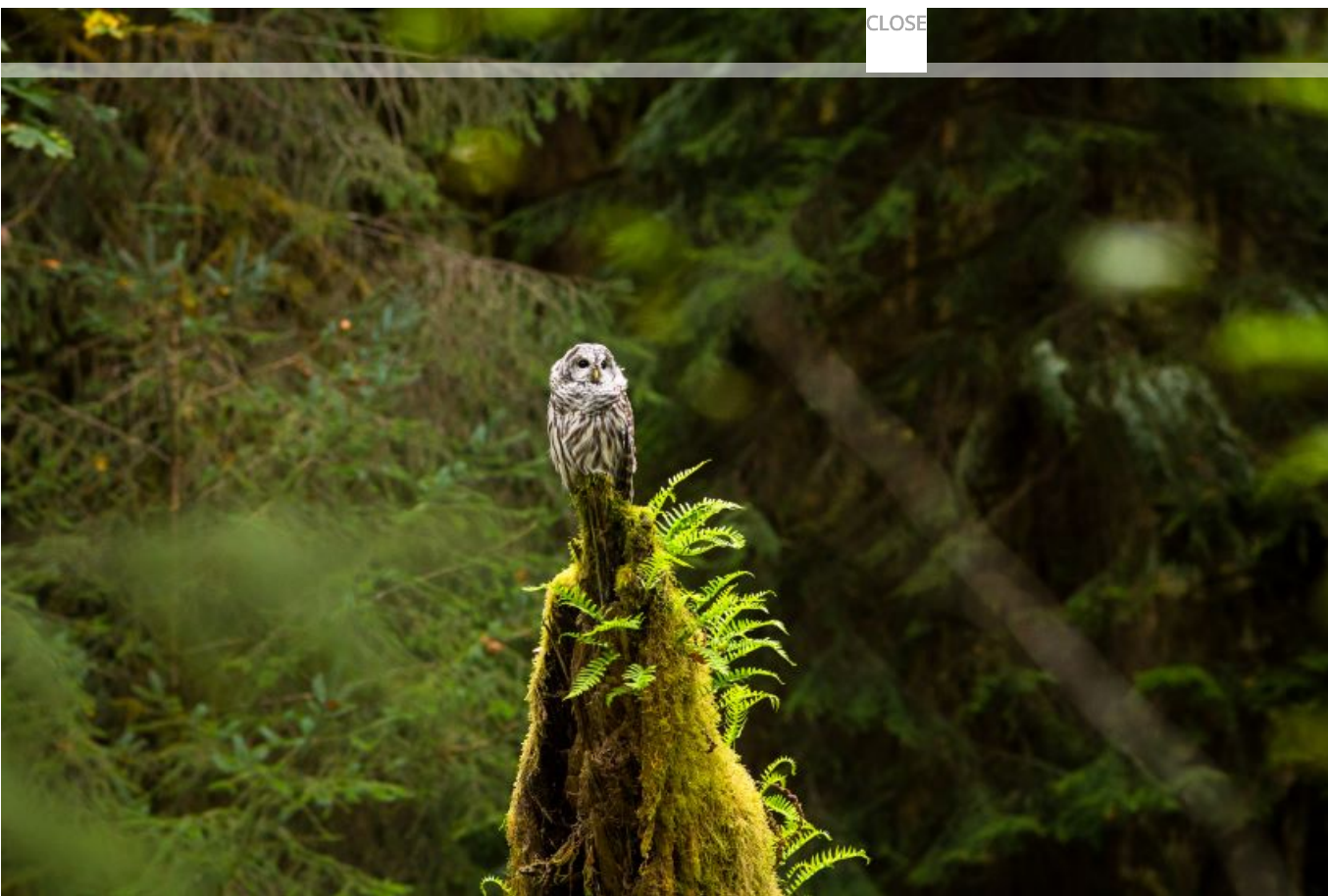
of an [edge habitat](#). In contrast, a mature forest will h^{CLOSE} many of the rarest species which require very specific conditions. The most famous example is the endangered [spotted owl](#) that only lives in healthy old growth temperate evergreen forests.

Young Forest Management

While scientists may argue over technical details, the concept of forest succession is the stuff of Ecology 101. But, similar to the manufactured controversy over climate science, timber and game interest groups have started using isolated studies to promote the idea that forests need to stay young. And the government seems to be listening to them. In 2022, there were at least [a dozen examples](#) of government-run logging projects cutting down mature and old-growth forests and trees. In several of these, the Forest Service explicitly sought to [reduce the mature forest](#) and “balance the age class distribution” of [public lands](#).

Unfortunately, the [Harvard University research](#) challenging the science behind “young forest” logging efforts has received less attention. The results of studies that show young forests [sequester more carbon per year](#) than old-growth forests are not surprising because young forests are growing more rapidly. Concluding that it makes sense to cut old forests to allow new ones to grow ignores that logging [releases 40%-60%](#) of the carbon already stored in old-growth forests. In fact, it can take [up to 20 years](#) for young forests to compensate for the carbon released through soil disturbance from logging. Similarly, studies showing that many wildlife species [require young forest](#) as habitat are far from groundbreaking. It is well established that species composition shifts as forests age.

According to the United Nations, the [composition](#) of American forests is roughly 67% naturally regenerated. This classification encompasses previously logged forests, including young forests as well as older second and third growth. Only 25% of US forestland qualifies as primary forest – a definition that roughly correlates to old growth. The remaining 8% is planted timber, or tree farms. In light of these numbers, the disingenuousness of eliminating old growth to encourage young forest becomes apparent.



Mature forests are the climax of a cycle that can take hundreds of years to complete.

New Data

On Earth Day 2022, President Biden signed an [executive order](#) to establish a federal strategy to protect old-growth forests. The order gave the Interior and Agriculture departments one year in which to create a federal definition of old-growth and mature forests and build a database of forests on federal lands. Definitions and an initial inventory of mature and old-growth forests on Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service lands [were released](#) April 20, 2023. A national map of mature and old-growth forests on Forest Service lands is available in the [Climate Risk Viewer](#). Surprisingly, the new census resulted in a much higher estimate of old-growth and mature forest than previous scientific studies. Unsurprisingly, timber interests responded by clamoring that additional [protection is unnecessary](#).

Respect the Elderly

While global logging companies push for access to the [high-value timber](#) found in primary forests, citizens and environmental groups must continue to fight for the protection of older trees. This is especially important in the Eastern United States, where older regenerated forests are approaching maturity. Individuals can contact the [White House](#) and their [representatives in Congress](#) (or use the EarthJustice [action form](#)) to support a strong, lasting national rule that protects old growth on federal land from logging. The federal government only owns [28% of forest land](#) in America. Old growth [on state lands](#) and privately owned forests are not subject to federal protections and logging interests there ensure that there will be no shortage of young forest. Protecting all federal forests would not be enough to meet the 30×30 standard or the [forest-conservation targets](#) set at COP26.

One indicator of the land management version of [greenwashing](#) is whether the planned logging project is a clearcut. Although efficient and profitable for loggers, [clearcutting](#) is never a sound environmental strategy. Sign up for alerts from environmental nonprofits that work towards conservation in your region. When you learn of proposed clearcuts in your regional forests, use the public process to speak out against it by attending a public meeting and submitting a formal comment to the governing agency.