

Modern Horse Logging

We believe we know the secret to sustainable, improvement, restorative forestry. The secret is:

There is no secret. Sustainable forestry is a matter of skilled, hard, dangerous, physical work.

There are many advantages and benefits possibly available through modern horse logging. However, it must be understood that having horses as the power source for extraction does not guarantee a sensitive, improvement or restorative harvest. The human operator and the **environmental ethic** practiced are the greatest deciding features for any activity in the forest.

Animal powered extraction of log length segments is the ultimate low impact, overland, removal technique. This method is particularly appropriate in a forested setting that has high aesthetic value, environmental concerns, and long-term investment as a married vision.

- The spot compaction of animal feet is far less damaging to the forest soil and tree roots than the continuous track created by a wheel or track driven machine.
- Animal powered forestry operates on solar fuel in the form of hay and grain and requires less fossil fuel than machines. Animals produce fertilizer as a by-product, not carbon monoxide, therefore contributing less to the global warming situation. The fuel required to harvest timber with animal power is produced locally and reduces dependence on foreign oil. This sourcing method keeps more of the money produced from the forest resource in the community that it came from.
- Animals are self-repairing. Living beings heal themselves if injured. There has never been a logging machine that fixed itself. This aspect does require cultural skill, in the form of animal husbandry, which indeed means being married to the living creatures that are your working partners. This is an intangible social benefit of animal powered forestry. It is well recognized that relationships with animals are therapeutic for human mental health.
- Animals are truly renewable. They replace themselves. No one has ever found a baby skidder in the woods one morning. Again, this requires cultural skill, animal husbandry, and a relationship between animals and people.
- Animal powered forestry is labor intensive and low volume production. This is often mentioned by conventional forestry interests as a negative feature of a heritage-based technology. We believe it is a benefit. Recent reports state that 40% of the forested land base in Virginia is in privately owned tracts of 40 acres or less. It is finally being recognized that the current level of consumption of forest products is not sustainable with available resources and that these smaller

pieces will have to be part of the resources base in order to meet human needs for forest products. This fragmentation of ownership and forest parcel size shrinkage is projected to continue under increased population pressure. Animal powered harvesting systems are low cost enterprises that can economically harvest these smaller boundaries.

Small sized tracts of timber can not be harvested with conventional methods that require higher capitalization and expensive moving cost. The economic pressure in conventional forest harvesting operations influences most loggers to feel that they must cut all the trees to make their work cost effective. This restricts the silvicultural prescriptions available for the management of the forest.

Our method of selecting individual trees on a “worst first” basis and limiting removal to no more than 30% retains the forested condition and is indeed improvement forestry. It is an example of humans behaving as beneficial predators. Not high grading or trophy hunting, but allowing the strongest to survive. The holes created in the forest canopy are substantial enough for “shade intolerant” species to regenerate naturally from seedlings of the superior specimens that are left in a healthy “good growing” condition. We believe that basically the repair of the forest from previous “high grading” is best accomplished through several successive “low grading” harvests. We also find that this approach is an improvement practice on sites that have been previously even aged managed or clear cut.

This is why we believe that animal powered extraction and single tree selection, on a worst first basis, is the best way for “man to age the forest”. Conventional foresters can define this as crop tree management, thinning from below, low grading, commercial thinning or whatever they want, we simply think of it as our best attempt at restorative forestry.

We believe our approach is of great economic value in the long-term perspective of generating income from the forest. We can grow more clear (defect free) lumber per acre with this approach and that is where the money is -- in producing quality not quantity, particularly in mixed (hardwood- oak -hickory type) forests. Perhaps, the greatest value to this approach is that the community grows in wealth, stability, and interdependence because the best is always grown to a climax condition before extraction for human use.

We believe the forests are of greater value to human survival than is currently understood. It is a good principal to protect and preserve what we don't fully understand. The forest is precious to human survival particularly given the erratic weather of the last few decades. The forests are the lungs of the planet, the first water filtration system for our every swallow and the air conditioner for the whole world. We must treat the forest with respect and due regard to insure our own existence.

Having said all that and probably preaching to the choir in this publication please let me start at the beginning again. *This horselogging is hard work.* Low grading harvest prescriptions are low paying in the current commodity priced markets. One of our goals is to:

“Perpetuate truly sustainable cultural traditions that produce social capital through development of livelihoods that reward ground level forest stewardship skills, protection of the environment, and preservation of family integrity.” This is one of

the ways we intend to accomplish our mission statement: **To address human needs for forest products while creating a nurturing coexistence between the forest and the human community.** Anyone interested in our work, becoming a horselogger, locating a horselogger, or contributing to our organization is invited to contact us.

Jason Rutledge, President
Healing Harvest Forest Foundation
8014 Bear Ridge Rd. SE
Copper Hill, Va. 24079
540-651-6355 email: rutledge@swva.net