

## Forests

### Forests – the Basics

Forests are an integral part of our eco-system. They produce oxygen while at the same time absorbing carbon dioxide and filtering pollutants from the air. They act as sponges, soaking up rainfall and preventing flooding. Forests filter our drinking water, removing toxins and unsafe chemicals as well as anchor ground soil thus preventing erosion. Forests are also the primary habitat for nearly 90 percent of plant and animal species living on land.

Approximately 190 million acres of national forests exist in the United States. These areas are integral to our planet's health. Some of this land has been designated as wilderness areas and protected. Yet, about half our national forests have been seriously affected by logging, mining, road building, and other ecologically damaging activities.

- Half of all forests that originally covered the Earth are gone.
- A forest area the size of 20 football fields is lost every minute to paper production.
- Over 430,000 miles of road cut through national forests (that's more than eight times the length of the Interstate Highway System!)
  - Americans use an average of 741 pounds of paper, per person, per year
- Although less than 5% of the world's population, the United States uses 27% of the world's commercially harvested wood
- One-sixth of the wood delivered to construction sites is never used.



### Old Growth Forests

Old growth forests, commonly referred to as virgin forests, are extremely old areas of wilderness. These areas have multiple defining characteristics including little or no sign of human disturbance and an assortment of live and dead trees of many sizes, shapes, and ages. Old growth forests are home to a wide variety of plant and animal life. These forests are quickly disappearing; America has currently lost 96% of its old growth forests.

Most forests in the U.S. are second-growth or regeneration forests. These forests result from the destruction of virgin plants and trees and are the result of regeneration. Unfortunately, these forests are significantly less ecologically diverse than old growth forests and require anywhere from a few centuries to several millennia to revert to their original form.

### Forests and Jewish Values

- Rabbi Shimon said, "The shade spread over us by these trees is so pleasant! We must crown this place with words of Torah" (*Zohar*, 2:127a).
- While the sage Choni was walking along a road, he saw a man planting a carob tree. Choni asked him: "How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit?" "Seventy years," replied the man. Choni then asked: "Are you so healthy a man that you expect to live that length of time and eat its fruit?" The man answered: "I found a fruitful world because my ancestors planted it for me. Likewise, I am planted for my children."
- Shimon bar Yochai taught that "if you are holding a sapling in your hand, and someone says that the Messiah has drawn near, first plant the sapling, and then go and greet the Messiah." (*Avot d'Rebbe Natan* 31b)
- When in your war against a city you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees, wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you under siege? Only trees that you know to not yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for constructing siege works against the city that is waging war on you, until it has been destroyed. (*Deut. 20:19-20*)



### Wilderness Act

National forests are protected in this country by two main laws. **The Wilderness Act of 1964** seeks to protect all areas where "the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." These "wilderness" areas are fully protected from disruptions to wildlife such as logging and mining. Since 1964, the act has grown from protecting 9 million acres of forests to over 100 million.

The rest of our national forests are protected under the **National Forest Management Act of 1976**. Under this Act the Secretary of Agriculture is required to develop



plans, with public input, to maintain the diversity of life within the country's forests. This means that areas that are not protected under the wilderness act, although open for development, are still protected from needless destruction. Logging and other human activities can occur but conservation and sustainability must be a primary concern.

## Forests (Cont.)

### Programmatic Ideas

- Create reusable bags for congregants – We waste billions of tons of paper a year by using disposable shopping bags. Decorate cloth bags with Jewish quotes about the environment and donate them to the temple. A sturdy reusable bag has a lower environmental impact than disposable plastic bags after using it 11 times.
- Purchase an acre of rainforest – Purchasing an area of rainforest ensures that it will be protected from harmful logging practices. For more information go to these sites:

<http://www.buyrainforest.org/>  
<http://www.therainforestsite.com/>  
<http://www.ecologyfund.com>



- Go camping – Spending time in the woods makes you realize just how important undeveloped wilderness is. Organize a congregational camping trip and conduct a nature themed service.
- Sell 100% recycled wrapping paper – Around the holidays, congregations can buy and redistribute recycled wrapping paper. If every American family wrapped just 3 presents in re-used materials, it would save enough paper to cover 45,000 football fields.
- Plant a tree – Planting just one tree saves approximately 2,000 lbs. of CO<sub>2</sub> from being released into the atmosphere. For more information on how to choose and plant a tree go to: <http://www.backyardgardener.com/tree/>.
- Fix Northern Israel – This summer approximately 16,500 acres of forests and grazing fields were destroyed by rockets in the north. Congregations can participate in a wide array of mission trips or can raise money to be put toward the \$400 million rebuilding effort. For more information go to: <http://www.jnf.org>
- Act out the Lorax - The Lorax is perhaps the single greatest children's book written on the subject of conservation. Hold a public reading or act out the story, inserting Jewish text into the Lorax's speech to enhance his conservation message.



- Tu B'shvat Seder – This is a tradition that goes back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century Jewish mystics. Like we use symbols to celebrate our freedom from slavery at Passover, we can use fruits and vegetables to symbolize our relationship with trees. For sample Seders contact the Religious Action Center (information below).

- Cancel Your Junk Mail – Catalog retailers mail approximately 17 billion catalogs every year. Most of these quickly find their way into the garbage. Canceling your junk mail significantly cuts down on the amount of waste produced. Start a campaign in your temple to convince all congregants to do this. For more information go to:  
<https://www.dmaconsumers.org/cgi/offmailing>

### Small Actions – Big Rewards

Convincing your synagogue to take small steps can make a big difference. The following statistics are from the National Resource Defense Counsel:

- If every household in the US replaced one box of virgin fiber **facial tissues** (175 sheets) with 100% recycled paper we could save **163,000 trees**.
- If every household in the US replaced one roll of virgin fiber **toilet paper** (500 sheets) with 100% recycled paper we could save **423,900 trees**.
- If every household in the US replaced one roll of virgin fiber **paper towels** (70 sheets) with 100% recycled paper we could save **544,000 trees**.
- If every household in the US replaced one package of virgin fiber **napkins** (250 count) with 100% recycled paper we could save **1 million trees**.



### For More Information

- <http://www.rac.org> – The Religious Action Center Reform Judaism
- <http://www.coejl.org> – Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life
- <http://www.wilderness.org/> - The Wilderness Society
- <http://www.npca.org/> - National Parks Conservation Association
- <http://www.nrdc.org/land/forests/> - The National Resource Defense Council forest page