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What Is Forest Planning. . . Why Do We Care?

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How does your organization do its planning...???

There are a number of "planning" terms which have become commonplace in forestry in recent years. The exact meaning or definition of these terms has not been consistently provided by those who use them on a regular basis. A few of these include "Restoration Forestry", "Life Cycle Analysis (LCA)", "Sustainability", "Ecological Processes", "Improve resiliency", "Climate Change", "Ecosystem Services" and "Fire Fighting". If you are not confused by these terms, you should be…

All organizations plan; the only difference is their approach. Prior to starting a new strategic planning process, it is necessary to recognize the past planning approaches which may have been used within that organization. It is also necessary to determine how each organization's cultural approach may influence the use of alternative approaches. Addressing these cultural issues is critical to the success of the current planning process.

"Approaches to Planning" by Dr. Russell Ackoff[1] (1981, John Wiley, New York) in "Creating the Corporate Future: Plan or be Planned" provides a pivotal view of planning. Forest planning (or attempts called planning) in forestry becomes easily identified and ranked for success or failure.

Russ Ackoff knew that the true solution to a problem can only be found by examining the design of the larger system in which the problem exists... and then correcting that design to eliminate the flaws that generated the problem in the first place. This "start with the whole and work back down to the broken part so you know *__why__* the part is broken (not just *__that__* the part is broken)" is a radical and upside-down way of thinking, but it works!

A favorite quote of Russ was from Albert Einstein, who once said…

> *"The specific problems we face cannot be solved using the same patterns of thought that were used to create them."*

Dr. Ackoff's conclusion: ***We must learn to think differently!***

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[1]Russell Lincoln Ackoff (1919 – 2009) was an American organizational theorist, consultant, and Anheuser-Busch Professor Emeritus of Management Science at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. Ackoff was a pioneer in the field of operations research, systems thinking and management science.

Born in Philadelphia in 1919, Ackoff has been characterized as an architect, a philosopher, a city planner, behavioral scientist, trailblazer in the field of operations research, the pre-eminent authority on organizational systems theory, and best-selling author. Recognized internationally as a pragmatic academic, Russ, as he was known to all, devoted most of his professional life to dissolving complex societal and organizational problems by engaging all stakeholders in designing solutions. A founding member of the Institute of Management Sciences, his work in consulting and education involved more than 350 corporations and 75 government agencies in the United States and beyond. He has been ranked highly in lists of the world's most influential business thinkers. But he is perhaps best known for making systems thinking understandable and accessible notably in two books Redesigning the Future (1974) and Creating the Corporate Future (1981).

Analytic view of problem solving, the problems persist. Systematic view of problem solving, the problems dissolve, never to return! It's that simple!

The four possible approaches to planning defined by Dr. Ackoff are:

1. Reactive - past oriented

Reactive planning is an active attempt to turn back the clock to the past. The past, no matter how bad, is preferable to the present. The underlying assumption is that the past is definitely better than the future will be. The past is romanticized and there is a desire to return to the "good old days." These people seek to undo the change that has created the present, and they fear the future, which they attempt to prevent. *In forestry, this is labelled "Restoration Forestry".*

2. Inactive - present oriented

Inactive planning is an attempt to preserve the present, which is preferable to both the past and the future. While the present may have problems it is better than the past. The expectation is that things are as good as they are likely to get and the future will only be worse. Any additional change is likely to be for the worse and should therefore be avoided. *In forestry, there is substantial effort into attempts to maintain the present through planning for "Improving Resiliency", "Ecological Processes" and "Ecosystem Services". If the present cannot be preserved, planning is forced to shift to "Fire Fighting".*

3. Preactive - predict the future

Preactive planning is an attempt to predict the future and then to plan for that predicted future. Technological change is seen as the driving force bringing about the future, which will be different than the present or the past. The planning process will seek to position the organization to take advantage of the change that is happening around them. *In forestry, this is managing for "Climate Change".*

4. Proactive - create the future

Proactive planning involves designing a desired future and then inventing ways to create that future state. Not only is the future a preferred state, but the organization can actively control the outcome. Planners actively shape the future, rather than just trying to get ahead of events outside of their control. The predicted changes of the preactive planner are seen not as absolute constraints, but as obstacles that can be addressed and overcome. In forestry, this is *"Active Forest Management".*

In each of these approaches the "Planning Horizon" should be recognized, understood and critically evaluated.

Trees grow, decline, die and decay. This is biology and these are facts. It is not possible to save a tree. However, it is possible to save a forest, if that forest is maintained in a healthy state. As trees age and decline, death from disease and insects becomes significant and problematic. The forest planner's only options become – let it die and decay, let it burn, or harvest it.

Proactive forest planning requires a Planning Horizon at least as long as the anticipated culmination of growth in the forest of interest. This allows for the Sustainable capacity of the forest to be discovered. Attempts at planning for periods less than a full planning horizon fall into Ackoff's approaches #1 and #2. With this in mind, now go back to consider the popular terms which are being used in forestry as attempts at forest planning.

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