

not appear to know what percentage of the world's remaining old-growth forests should be preserved, in order to ensure an adequate carbon sink, watersheds, and other ecological functions.

How should we proceed in the face of such uncertainty? A cautious, conservative approach is compelling for several reasons. It is conservative and most protective of the survivability of humans and other forms of life dependent on their decisions. It is most sensitive to the rights and interests of future generations who have no direct representation in political decision making. It is reversible: if scientific research tells us we have preserved too much wilderness, we can always develop it later. Pursuing the precautionary principle imposes certain opportunity costs. Timber jobs, corporate profits, and government revenues may fall, although some of that may be offset, as the B.C. government and others have recognized, through value added industries. These economic losses may also be countered by increased opportunities for recreational uses of the forests. As wild lands diminish globally, those that remain will eventually become more valuable.

Protection of old-growth forests is ultimately a public goods question. In this particular case, it may be in the best interests of the global community to have British Columbia preserve all of its remaining roadless, undeveloped forests, about 60 percent of all public forest lands, just as it may be in our collective interest to preserve tropical rainforests. The distributional issues are crucial here as in other areas of environmental regulation: the benefits will be dispersed widely--even globally, while, the costs, at least the short-term and transitional ones, will be borne narrowly. One option is to provide transitional assistance to workers and managers who lose their jobs because of preservationist policies and need retraining, relocation, or other aid. Wealthy countries like Canada can redistribute resources to provide that transitional assistance, and given the disproportionate impact their residents have on the global biosphere because of their high levels of consumption, they would be morally obligated to do so. Wealthy countries would also be obligated to provide the resources for the transitional assistance in the less-developed countries, for the same reasons. Canada's timber, planning, and preservation policies pursued in the early 1990s have engaged the public, industry, and government in a major policy debate. Such a commitment to participation is a promising commitment to democracy. But if the process is to be successful, it will have to be more informed by ecological principles than simply by the goal of trying to ensure that current timber practices are sustainable in perpetuity.