

Ghost Forest In Manhattan

Its Message of Conservation

By Robert R. Williams, Certified Forester



Advanced Forestry Solutions working with Maya Lin to build a mock up of the exhibition to better understand how the trees could be used in the actual exhibition in New York!

On May 10th Maya Lin's "Ghost Forest", a commissioned public artwork, was opened to the public in Madison Square Park, New York City. This art exhibition was envisioned and designed out of a concern for impacts of global climate change issues and impacts to forests.

Ghost forests are the remains of once vibrant forest ecosystems. As sea levels rise, the salty water slowly poisons the trees, leaving a haunted ghost forest of dead and dying timber. Still standing in or near brackish water, the decaying trees of a ghost forest resemble giant greying pillars that protrude into the air.

Maya Lin was inspired to bring attention to these

ghost forests while sitting in her Colorado studio being able to see a large stand of dead pine trees killed by pine bark beetles. She understood to design and erect a ghost forest in New York City, she would have to source the trees from nearby as well as use trees actually impacted by climate issues, thus my involvement in the project.

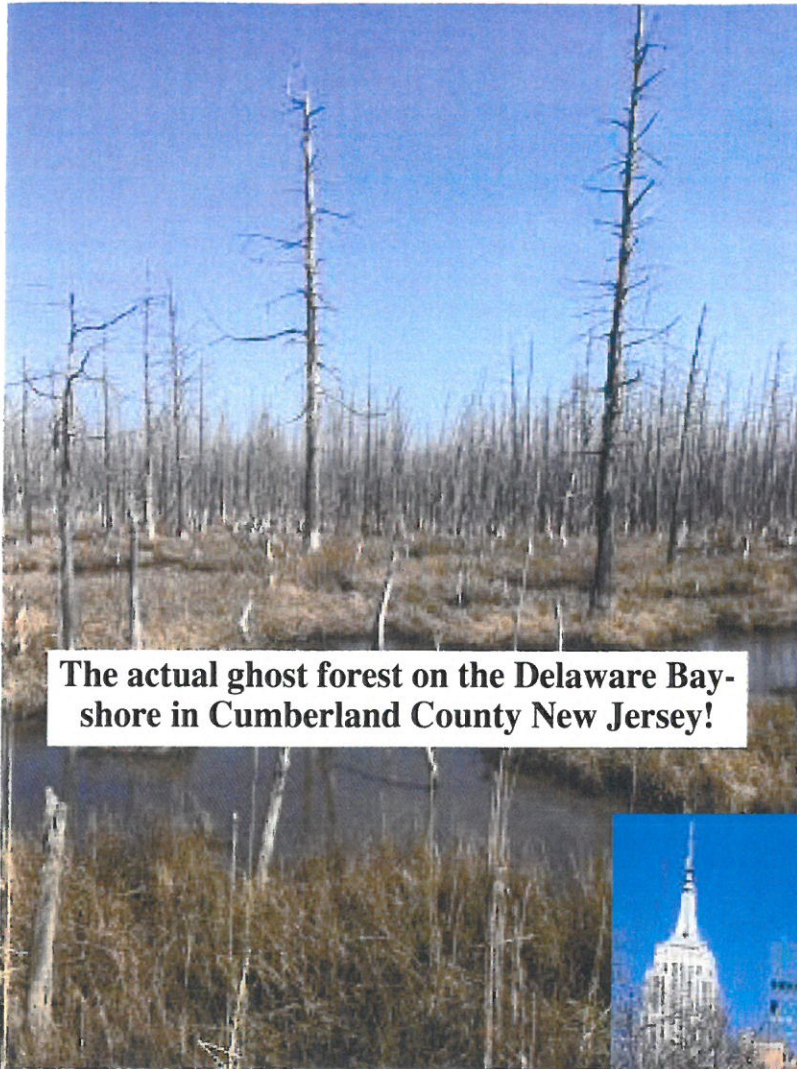
I am a forester based in southern New Jersey and have worked on restoration of Atlantic white-cedar forests successfully for many decades. Restoring Atlantic white-cedar is relatively simple, and in fact ample scientific literature has contributed to development of Best Management Practices for the species. Despite the plethora of knowledge surrounding the species, Atlantic white-cedar continues to suffer severe declines along the coastal areas of the United States and significantly in New



Salvaged high quality Atlantic white cedar logs from the restoration project headed to Williamsburg Virginia, to be used to restore historic colonial buildings and also to lock up carbon for centuries to come instead of being allowed to rot and emit more carbon!

Jersey.

Atlantic white-cedar is a globally threatened and criti-



The actual ghost forest on the Delaware Bay-shore in Cumberland County New Jersey!

cally imperiled forest ecosystem across its entire range with a more than 90 percent loss of acreage since colonial settlement. This decline continues with sea level rise playing a significant role in this decline. Severe storm surges that bring salt water inland also plays a role in the development of ghost forests.

In early 2020, I was approached by the staff of Madison Square Park as to a field tour to see actual ghost forests. We had a great tour and soon thereafter they asked if we could source 50 dead full length cedar trees into the park in New York City. I met with a logger, Colin McLaughlin whose Advanced Forestry Solutions company has the technical logistics to complete such a complicated endeavor.

Next, I began to look at potential forest sites where restoration work could supply the needed trees. We first tried a restoration site that the Tardiff's owned but those trees proved to be too far decayed and were not able to be safely used in that there is a significant liability issue having the public walk through the planned exhibition. The project was then shut down due to the Pandemic and it was not until the winter of 2021 that plan-

ning moved forward.

By March of 2021, we were able to source the trees from a second restoration project near the Delaware Bay shore region. These trees were blown down by the severe wind of Super Storm Sandy but still were sound enough to be safely erected.

Maya Lin and the Madison Park staff visited the site, and we actually prepared a mockup of installing a half dozen trees in an adjacent field. Everything went well and by early April, 50 trees were on their way into the city in the middle of the night to avoid traffic.

Her vision as an artist and environmental activist was to demonstrate the harsh reality of the impact of climate change. As Maya Lin herself said, "The Atlantic white cedars have suffered from die off due to saltwater inundation. I want you to feel the totemic character of each of these dead trees in contrast to the living park that surrounds it. I also wanted to raise awareness on critical nature-based solutions, as repairing and protecting more habitants can help reduce emissions and protect and restore biodiversity".



Forester Bob Williams at the Ghost Forest in Madison Square Park after tree installation, with the Empire State Building in the background. Bob continues to make the point that active management and not preservation is what is needed in our forests!

As the forester who has walked through these trees for more than thirty years and known each tree more personally and ecologically than any human being, I am pleased with what she has done with the trees in the exhibition and understand her being able to design the installation of the trees as they relate to each other and their new surrounding environment.

But the most significant impact these trees will have in their death is their impact on tens of thousands of human beings every day for the next six months who will visit and walk or sit in the ghost forest. This could result in a call to action as action evolves into actualized conservation efforts; the sacrificed trees would have a great meaning for the remaining Atlantic white-cedar forests.

Forestry and forest management continue to struggle with a gridlock of political/social issues that have obstructed and suppressed meaningful needed forest management or forest restoration efforts throughout the United States.

My view of the exhibition may differ with the artist but maybe not. I share the view with the artist that each individual tree has a character and collectively they tell an important story. I am hopeful they will enlighten and connect urban folks with issues in our forests. Issues that affect us all in terms of a healthy environment, a viable economy, and the sustainability of our planet.

I am not a climatologist, but I know well that healthy, vibrant growinforests are essential to a sustainable climate. Forests are going to play a critical role in reducing or stabilizing carbon emission issues across the entire planet. Dying, burning, and overstocked forests are carbon emitters adding to the problem thus no longer providing one of the solutions to the problem.

The long-term benign neglect of our forest resources is resulting in massive forest loss. Each season we see millions of acres of forest in the West burnt to the ground contributing enormous amounts of CO₂ to the atmosphere

while little is done to mitigate the impacts of these fires. Here in the East, I seem to spend most of my time showing media folks hundreds of thousands of dead trees, yet nothing is done. The results of this comes from an illusion of preservation. Ongoing government policies that allow land to simply be locked up and set aside with the illusion that mother nature will take care of everything. If we want to continue with massive fires and dead forests, we only need to stay on this preservation course.

Humans, forests, and fires have co-evolved since

the beginning of time, however recently we have neglected our forests under the guise of preservation, which is the exact opposite of what is needed if we want healthy forests. We have shifted the stock of forests so drastically that fire adapted species such as the giant Sequoia are now dying from stand replacing fires.

The ghost forest offers an opportunity to help urban folks understand they are part of the forest not invaders and exploiters. The ghost forest is a wake-up call. It is an opportunity to help people understand we need to be collaborating with mother nature because we are a part of it.

It is the conservation of our forests that is the critical issue – not the preservation of our forests.

The ghost forest speaks to solutions and action that we can be taking now!

Conservation and active management of our forests that does include at times tree

removal and use of those trees for renewable, biodegradable forest products is essential to the forest solutions to climate related issues.

Many of our forests are in trouble and need our help NOW not after years of bickering and finger pointing when it will be too late!

If you have any questions you can email Bob Williams at Bob@PineCreekForestry.com



The Ghost Forest with a lawn to enable visitors to walk, sit and picnic among the trees. We hope they see the need for managing our forests better.

