

A Ghost Forest

This morning, I watched a short video about an art installation currently on view in Madison Square Park in Manhattan. The installation is called *Ghost Forest*, and it is by Maya Lin, an artist most famous for designing the Vietnam War Memorial at the age of 21, while still an undergraduate. Lin's new work involves a towering stand of 49 dead Atlantic White Cedar trees, each around 40 feet tall. These trees, which were harvested from the Pine Barrens of New Jersey, form a "ghost forest" in the center of New York City while drawing attention to less visible ghost forests – formerly vibrant woodlands, now dead – in the Northeast. The exhibit is meant to raise awareness about extreme weather events that threaten forest integrity. The specific cedar trees in the exhibition fell victim to the problem of saltwater intrusion, a major issue plaguing New Jersey's coastal ecosystem.

Watching the video, I thought of a trip I took to the New Jersey Pine Barrens two summers ago, to meet a logger named Colin McLaughlin who works most days in the Atlantic White Cedar forests along the New Jersey coast. McLaughlin didn't grow up in a logging family and worked as a union ironworker in Philadelphia for many years before he first touched a piece of logging equipment. He became a logger when a local landowner approached him. The landowner saw that the cedar forests were dying and didn't want the wood to go to waste. He also had environmental reasons in mind: if the cedar forests are responsibly harvested, there is a far greater chance for regeneration. In addition to the importance of McLaughlin's work from a forestry perspective, the logger's story interested me because he got his start logging in a place where there are almost no other loggers, hardly any industry infrastructure, and



the public is not familiar with logging work. As far as logging goes, he was a trailblazer.

While I was reporting that story, I had a feeling that I often have while reporting for *The Northern Logger*, which is the feeling of being far removed from the public eye. Most Americans – myself included, before I started reporting on the industry – have no reason to understand where working forests are or how they are managed. The mass of the land base, even in densely populated areas like the East Coast, is simply not visible to most people. Enterprising folks might get out for a hike now and then, but for the majority, if something isn't on their commute, it might as well not exist. Even if people keep up with the news, there is a world of difference between reading that forest health is suffering and actually living with the consequences.

I appreciate Maya Lin's attempt to draw attention to forest health by directly placing a dead forest in the middle of one of the most populated places on earth. It is as if the artist is saying, "You have to look at this. You can't ignore it for one minute longer." Hopefully people who walk through the "Ghost Forest" will remember the experience in a different way than they would if they merely read about forest problems. Certainly, more people will see the trees in the middle of Manhattan than will venture out toward the blueberry plantations and cranberry swamps of the New Jersey Pine Barrens.

The question, for me, is: what happens next? We're asked to acknowledge problems in the world a lot – by the news, by our communities, by social media. There are so many problems in the world, though, and it can be hard to know how to respond. I find myself sometimes feeling desensitized to issues in the world because there's just too much going on, and I'm only one person. So, I wonder, is it fair to ask your average person – busy with family, community, and keeping food on the table – to care about forest health? Moreover, if we can convince people to care, how do we convince them to act?

I don't have the answer to these questions. We live in a time when people don't have much attention to spare for anything, much less the solutions to global problems. I know that I appreciate being able to tell stories like Colin McLaughlin's, stories that are not only about forest health but also about the men and women who work in the woods. I find that even when stories are about big issues, it makes sense to put a human face on them. Hopefully people who see a piece of public artwork like "Ghost Forest" will take a step beyond just witnessing the trees and get curious about the men and women who spend every day in these environments. Hey, maybe they'll even take out a subscription to *The Northern Logger*!

Eileen Townsend