



ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION
ASSESSMENT & MANAGEMENT

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CRISIS ON THE RURAL/URBAN INTERFACE

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The wooded and pastoral nature of Western Washington's landscape is rapidly changing due to complex social, economic and demographic factors. In part, these changes are the result of the long-term ill-effects of forest practices in the state. High quality, mature timber is becoming scarce and foreign markets get a large percent of it. Large tracts of private forest land are being over-cut, sold and converted to other uses. Many forest landowners now find it more lucrative to develop land that was previously in timber production. The timber industry and the people who depend on the forests for their livelihood are experiencing a serious crisis. At the same time, demand for forest products is growing substantially. This situation increases demands for more lumber and products from state and federal lands, which creates conflicts between various groups. Region-wide debates are in progress to determine what our finite public forest lands should be used for: timber production, wildlife and fisheries habitat, recreation, watershed protection, etc.

With the timber crisis as a backdrop, we are also experiencing an enormous influx of people from other parts of the country. In addition to these new residents to the region, there is an exodus from urban centers to rural areas. The very peace and beauty that have attracted more people here are in danger of disappearing as a result of the needs and demands of this increasing population. There is a profound change occurring: from rural land to urban; from forests to suburban housing developments, shopping malls and commercial/industrial parks. Many of the people moving to Western Washington come here from areas that have become over-developed, where air and water pollution and over-crowding have reduced the quality of life to unacceptable levels. In moving here they become part of the problem or just possibly they become part of the solution.

They can become part of the solution by the choices they make on and with the land. Five or ten acres may seem inconsequential in comparison to the enormous acreage controlled by large corporations and public agencies, but it is important to realize the values and resources that may be present on even small acreage. Five acres can furnish fish and wildlife habitat, host a wide variety of native vegetation, provide clean air and water, be a critical watershed element and help to maintain the rural character of an area. Five acres can make a difference. Five hundred five-acre parcels, managed and developed intelligently can have a tremendous impact on our quality of life. It is in our best interest to become aware of natural processes and to work with the land, not against it.

Through knowledge of the natural vegetation, soils, wetland complexes and their functions, stream systems and the watersheds that they drain, resident wildlife and

fisheries resources, climate and wind patterns, and how they interrelate, landowners and developers can make better decisions. They can help minimize the degradation inherent in land clearing, road grading and construction of homes and other structures. By thinking about goals, needs, processes and consequences, we landowners can save ourselves great amounts of time, trouble and money. Make no mistake, ill-considered development must be paid for in the long run, and the costs of mitigation and restoration are always greater than prevention.

Before buying or building on rural land, use common sense. Define your goals. Decide what you want and need and what type of land will be most suitable. If your dream is a 6,000 square-foot house, a shop, orchard, garden and pasture, don't buy densely wooded land. Consider costs, both environmental and economic. Think about long-term maintenance. The less you alter the natural elements of the land, the less it will cost.

Look at the land and the surrounding area. Note features such as slope, soil type, signs of erosion, vegetation type and health, the presence of wetlands, streams, and natural drainage patterns, water table, wind patterns, unstable bluffs, and the local land use. Don't needlessly clear or remove trees. Consider conservation easements as a means to reduce your property taxes and help maintain open space.

Make an effort! Make a difference!

Elliott Menashe has been a private, natural resource management consultant since 1987. He is the owner of Greenbelt Consulting on Whidbey Island. Menashe received a degree in Forest Management from University of California at Berkeley in 1975 and attended the School of Fisheries at University of Washington in 1986-7. He is the author of *Vegetation Management: A Guide for Puget Sound Property Owners*, published by the Washington Department of Ecology in 1993. His firm specializes in low-impact forest and riparian management, reducing adverse effects of rural development, and restoration of degraded sites. Visit his webpage at www.greenbeltconsulting.com for more information on the services he provides.