

Blame sheep, not beetles, for dying trees



Permaculture
in Practice

by Nate
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New Mexico's colorful landscape is now more flamboyant. These days the red, orange and golden hues on our hillsides and mesas resemble New England in autumn. The difference is that many of our piñons won't come back next spring like those famous maples, oaks, and birches back East.

They're dead, killed by a weenie beetle. Even the oldtimers say that they haven't seen such a fervid invasion since those other Beatles corrupted the youth decades ago.

From both the perspective of someone wanting to sell certain properties and that of the uninformed eye, the skeletal remains, those pallid, piteous trunks and branches of the once-proud piñon, haunt vistas like zombies. And what's worse is that, like the characters in

an increasingly intense recurring nightmare, the trees stand as eerie reminders of the likely fate of their still-green neighbors.

Meanwhile, properties that were once described as "private" and "secluded" drop in value as neighbors peek down from portales at people they never knew existed. Often property owners must invest resources in walls, fencing, trees and shrubs – anything to create a "visual break" that will bring back quality of life and maybe even recoup some property value.

Of course, there's lots of money in death, especially these days for guys with big trucks and chainsaws. Certainly any dude brave enough to regularly spray the preventive chemical Sevin should be rewarded with a healthy Christmas bonus this year – or at least a decent medical plan to combat the effects of working with all that dangerous poison.

But, as sad as it is to see trees die, watch certain property values disintegrate and imagine people spraying Sevin for decades to come (Can you say, "Disclosure Statement?"), it is instructive to consider the root cause of this situation more deeply. It's actually not the fault of the instinct-driven bark beetle. It's not the fault

of the so-called "drought." (All we have to do is look at tree rings in this area during the last 2000 years and we find that we have been of late experiencing a relatively wet period). It's probably not even about Mars in retrograde.

No, the story of the piñon demonstrates why it is important to consider the unintended effects of technology. Our piñons are dying because in the late 1800s the railroad brought buttloads of boxcars full of sheep to northern New Mexico. Then the huge population quickly devoured the grasses in the large meadows between the relatively small stands of piñon and juniper. Finally, when the grasses were gone the frequent, localized, cool grass fires ceased to flare up. When this fire cycle stopped, the little piñon and juniper saplings, which would normally get burned up, grew up to create the unnatural density of piñons and junipers to which we have grown accustomed.

It's as if many of Northern New Mexico's "wild" lands were essentially the remains of a colossal, long-abandoned zoo in which one species, the piñon, pops up easily through the caliche. It's fruitful. It multiplies. And then it gets too dense, only

to become an obvious example of Birch's third principle of natural systems: "The probability of extinction of populations or a species is greatest when the density is very high or very low."

So, historically, the bark beetle was just some dumb bug doing his job. Shouldn't we just forgive him? More surprisingly, maybe we should think about how we might one day also thank the him for preventing the kind of catastrophic wildfires that destroy lives, homes, watersheds and entire communities. But time will tell if this gratitude is in order. Our fire seasons could get worse in the next few years due to all the dead wood, but without the sap and fuel from the needles any fires in beetle-infested areas might not be as large or intense as recent crown fires. In the meantime let's try to seize this opportunity to re-sow native meadows and plant productive perennials in microclimates under the protection of various alternatives trees.

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