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PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

March 19, 2008

For immediate release

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What's In Those Woods?

It's all too often that when walking property with a landowner, I find that they don't know what's growing in their woodlots. Are there big trees, little trees, one species or a score? Is it flat, are there wet areas, what else is growing in there? The answers to these questions are important for landowners to consider when deciding their forest management goals. Certain forest conditions are needed for specific forest goals, for example, if you want to make maple syrup, having a good number of large sugar maples is handy, or if you want to attract wildlife, having trees and shrubs that provide food and cover is crucial. Fortunately, there are some easy steps that can help landowners better understand their woods.

Start with a map and an aerial photograph of your property. You can get a tax map from the county clerk's office and aerial photos are available at a number of web sites on the internet. Try to line up the photo and the map. Aerial photos are a great first look, you can usually tell where forest roads are, if you have any forest clearings, and which forest patches, also called stands, are deciduous or evergreen.

Bring the photo and map with you outside and evaluate the contents of your woods. Walk the property boundary, and then crisscross the interior of your woods. You don't have to cover every inch, but walk enough to get the overall sense of what your forest contains.

Take a look around. What's under your feet? Look at the soils and the topography. Is the ground wet, or rocky? Is the land steep? Do you come across any creeks, ponds or marshes? Soils and terrain dictate the plant habitat, and how easy it is to access different areas of the forest.

What's over your head? What species of trees do you have? Try to learn 5 or 6 of your common trees. How big are the trees? The size of trees often relates to age of the stand. If you have a lot of small diameter trees, you probably have a young stand. A lot of large diameter trees, an older stand. How far apart are the trees? Were they planted or did they grow in naturally?

What do you see around you? Are there a lot of shrubs? How many seedlings and saplings are growing? Shrubs are great wildlife food and cover, and seedlings predict the future forest. Do you see other forest crops such as ginseng, nuts, or plants with ornamental value?

Take notes on all the different areas and features in your forest. Also make note of old house foundations, rock walls or other points of interest on your map. A fact finding mission like this can usually be completed in a day or less depending on how large your forestland is.

So how will this information be useful? When you sit down to frame your forest management goals, whether they include timber, wildlife, recreation, agroforestry, water or aesthetics, you'll know what you have to work with. Management strategies are different for different forest types. You'll know where you want to collect firewood, grow ginseng, hunt, or go bird watching. If you have trees that you think are harvestable, be sure to contact a forester to develop a plan with you and provide you with the best return for your trees and your forest. But, no matter what your forest management goals are, be sure to enjoy your woods!

Your local office of Cornell University Cooperative Extension can help you obtain a copy of the workbook "Forest Resources Management: A landowner's guide to getting started" available from the Natural Resources and Agricultural Engineering Service as bulletin #170 (www.nraes.org). For additional information on forestland activities that will benefit your objectives, visit Cornell's forestry website at www.ForestConnect.info, contact your local office of Cornell University Cooperative Extension, or join the New York Forest Owners Association through their website at www.nyfoa.org

This article was written by J. Rebecca Hargrave, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Chenango County, Norwich, NY.

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Word count: 659 words

Editors note: This article is the ninth in a 15 part series that is provided through a joint initiative of Cornell University Cooperative Extension and the New York Forest Owners Association as an educational service that helps the citizen of New York enjoy, use, and sustain private rural lands. For more information on these and other topics, please contact your local office of Cornell Cooperative Extension or visit www.ForestConnect.info or www.NYFOA.org