

The landscape of Indiana has developed over the last 15,000 years or so. For most of that time humans were having impacts. These impacts drastically increased in the last couple hundred years including removal of most of Indiana's original forests. Woodlands are a dynamic, interconnected and complicated biological system. Impacts take decades or centuries to play out.

Fire has played an important part in Indiana's forests. Before Europeans arrived we did not have earthworms decomposing dead leaves and limbs from the bottom up. This supply of fuel made fire a large change agent of the landscape. Europeans introduced earthworms hitchhiking on equipment, and then started allowing trees back on the land. Fires were still being started from railroad equipment and were used to help improve grazing quality. Now we have almost eliminated fire in our woods.

This lack of fire and selective tree harvesting means that our beloved Oak Hickory forests are morphing into Beech Maple. Beech and Hard Maple are shade tolerant but fire susceptible. We are well into this change. Since most of our forests are about the same age after our reforestation efforts, we are lacking young forests and the animal species that inhabit them.

Openings allow light to the ground. This promotes species besides Beech and Maple. Openings are not being made in many private woodlands, partly because they are esthetically challenging and because many woodland owners are not having sales. Another reason is that private woodland parcel sizes are decreasing. Some are below critical volume to have timber sales. State Forests provide unique opportunities to create these ecologically critical niches.

State Parks, State Nature Preserves, set-asides in State Forests, Land Trust holdings and Conservation Easements, private holds that are too small or where the owners are philosophically opposed to harvests combine to be about 10% of Indiana woodlands. It would be great to have a time machine and create "old growth" forests in our lifetimes. But all we can do is wait for these areas to age.

This is a complicated issue. Decisions have large impacts that last well beyond human lifespans. Landscape management based on passion, philosophy and yard signs is not good science based stewardship.

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