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GLOBE EDITORIAL

Saving the woods

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SPRAWL DEVELOPMENT is eating up 40 acres a day of the Massachusetts countryside. Left unchecked, this process would eventually be as devastating to the state's woodlands as settlers were generations ago when they cleared the trees for farms -- only worse. Foresters refer to what the farmers did as a "soft deforestation" because it was reversible when the farms were abandoned and trees grew back. Clearing trees for the buildings and roads of today is a "hard deforestation."

Recently, Harvard University's Harvard Forest research and education center called for a public-private effort to protect woodlands in Massachusetts better. Its goals include designation of 250,000 acres of mostly state-owned forest land as "wildland" reserves, with no logging; the protection of 2.25 million private and public woodland acres -- about half the state -- for recreation, sustainable timbering, and wildlife habitat; and the establishment of regional woodland councils that could assist land owners and organizations in the management of forest land.

This is an ambitious vision, but it should guide public policies even if it cannot be realized quickly. Currently, about 1 million acres are protected publicly or privately, and the state's budget crunch has forced drastic cutbacks in the state's outlays for acquiring open space and conservation easements.

Douglas Foy, head of the Commonwealth Development Office, has pointed out that sprawl's voracious appetite for land could be slaked if towns would revise their zoning bylaws to permit houses on smaller lots. He said the average lot size of new houses here is 1.3 acres. New housing would also consume less land if the state would use all means to steer new construction toward settled areas with transit stations and public works infrastructure, and away from open land.

The state has already begun to select some "forever wild" areas like the reserves proposed by the Harvard Forest center. Under the state's plan, about 52,000 acres in large preserves would be set aside, along with 50,000 acres in smaller parcels to protect stands of old-growth trees or other features. These selections, which will be the subject of public hearings in June, are less than half what Harvard Forest proposes, but a good start.

The woodland councils envisioned by Harvard Forest could catalyze better management of the state's privately owned forests. Through sustainable timber practices, owners can reap income from their forests, even as they appreciate the wildlife habitat, privacy, and beauty they provide. Maintaining woodlands is an effort that must engage everyone from small land owners to town-meeting voters considering zoning issues to state officials setting bond-issue priorities. Without this engagement, asphalt will win. ■