

The Values and Uses of the Navajo Forest

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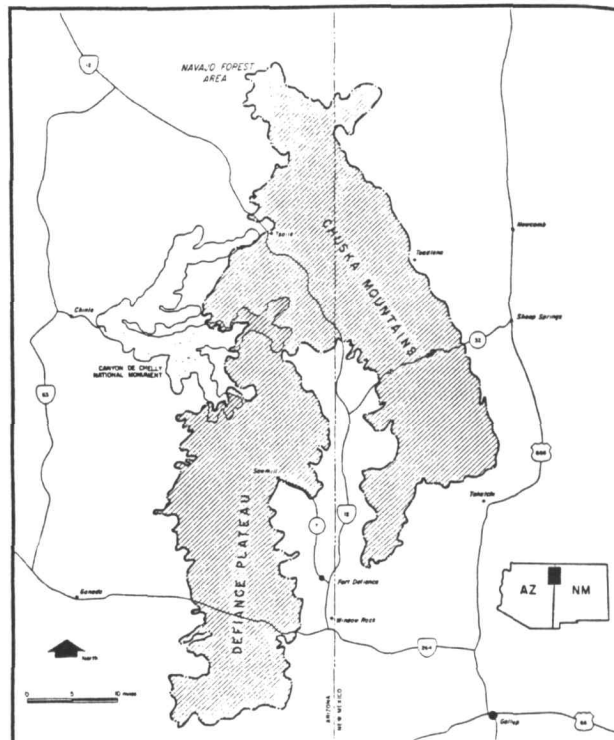
For centuries, the Navajo people have valued the forest as being the provider for the necessities of life. The forest provides food, wood products for homes, other dwellings, corals, fence posts, ceremonial need, firewood, and habitat for deer and other wildlife. Summer rains and winter snowfall replenish ponds and lakes on the mountain from which creeks and streams flow to the lower lands. The forest has also a great potential for recreational uses during the entire year. Another major and important use of the forestland is grazing by domestic livestock along with wildlife. The timber on the Navajo forest generates a substantial revenue to the Tribal government, as well as, providing employment for the Navajos.

The Navajo forest consists of two physiographic areas—the Defiance Plateau and the Chuska-Lukachukai mountain ranges in Arizona and New Mexico. The forest contains 690,498 acres of which 7,149 acres are allotted lands; 152,945 acres are non-commercial (pinyon, juniper, oak, grass, water brush) land; 31,507 acres are inaccessible lands (critical acres); 498,897 acres are operable trust timberland (10-Year Forest Management Plan, 1983). The principal timber species in both volume and value is ponderosa pine. Other species are grouped into a category called “mixed conifer,” which includes Engelmann spruce, Colorado blue spruce, Douglas fir, and corkbark fir (Navajo Commercial Forest Timber Inventory Report, 1979).

Pressure is continuously placed upon all the resources. If not properly managed, the renewable forest resources will be depleted just as happened with the non-renewable mineral resources. Also the multiple uses that the forest offers will be limited. Therefore, the need for intensive range and forest management is essential in Navajo forest and woodland.

Forest management is the sole responsibility of the Navajo Nation Forestry Department in cooperation with the Branch of Forestry of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The Department consists of several sections that coordinate efforts to improve, protect, develop, and maintain the range and the forest resources of the 537,553 acres of the Navajo Forest. The management involved provides planning, coordination, and direction for all programs designed to protect, improve, develop, and perpetuate Navajo forest resources. The intent is to maximize economic return within the framework of sound multiple use principles.

The first Master Management Plan for the Navajo forest was developed in 1953. Thereafter several revisions have been made. Presently, the 1983-Ten Year Forest Management Plan of the Navajo forest is being used to provide definitive policies and procedures that set the direction for



Location of the Navajo Forest.

Sources: Cultural Resources Overview for the Navajo Forest, 1984.

management. This plan allowed the Tribal Forestry Department to incorporate several sections. The role of each section is described as follows:

Field Operations—consists of four area coordinators and is responsible for maintaining contact with land users, informing them of the on-the-ground projects recommended by various programs, proposed projects, and other information relating to range and forest land. Educate grazing permittees as to proper range management and improvement.

Reforestation—improve understocked forest lands both by planting and seedbed preparation for natural regeneration. As of October 1985, the Navajo Tribe has planted three thousand acres of commercial forest with seedlings grown at Fort Defiance, Arizona. The greenhouses have the capability of producing half a million seedlings annually. Seedlings are grown from local seed collected from the Navajo forest.

Research and Development—perform forest inventories which include timber examination, other surveys, and field data. These inventories provide Navajo land managers with the information for future planning and evaluation. The data collected is necessary to calculate the optimum growing stock level, rotation age, annual allowable cut level, harvest schedule, cutting budget, product flow, and regulation scheme (10-Year Forest Management Plan, 1983).

Timber Management—mark timber appraisal and cutting based

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on silvicultural prescriptions. This section also performs timber cruising and oversees logging.

Forest Service—overlooks and handles permits for free-use timber, informs schools of fire prevention activities, public relations, and enforces forest regulations along with each commissioned officers.

Construction/Maintenance—maintain Forestry Department's facilities, construct new buildings, upkeep landscaping, and maintain vehicles and equipment.

Range Management—this position involves working with land users in developing and improving their range and livestock in coordination with the reforestation work. Other duties involves developing grazing management plans and land stabilization needs for improvement of reforested areas, water quality, and land loss as a result of erosion. It is also responsible for compiling information and field data of range/forest land for Navajo commercial forest range inventory, guidelines, and plant taxonomy.

Multiple Uses of the Navajo Forest

The Navajo Forest Products Industries is an enterprise of the Navajo Tribe that harvests and processes 40-50 million board feet of ponderosa yearly (10-Year Forest Management Plan, 1983). The mill is located in Navajo, New Mexico. Navajo Forest Products Industries provides revenue to the Navajo Tribe, as well as, employment for Tribal members.

An unrestricted amount of dead and downed firewood is available to all Navajos for personal use and for re-sale to the public. Commercial poles are cut for hogans (Navajo dwellings), cabins, fences, and posts. Non-commercial trees are used for firewood, posts, and fences. Under regulation, seasonal Christmas tree cutting is also permitted.

The forest is inhabited by wildlife species, including, deer, bear, beaver, coyote, bobcat, fox, porcupine, rabbits, squirrel, chipmunk, turkey, birds, and waterfowl. The forest provides a diversity of habitat such as thermal cover, hiding cover, roost sites, riparian zones, feeding, nesting, and fawning.

Many Navajos have established permanent homesteads in the forest and others move to the upper regions of the mountains for grazing livestock during the summer.

The Navajo Forest is utilized mostly on a seasonal basis for livestock grazing and agriculture by hundreds of Navajo families. Most of the grazing is done by sheep, cattle, and deer. Livestock are important both economically and culturally to the Navajos. Some of the agricultural products grown by the Navajos are corn and potatoes. Large fields are used for pasture and the growing of alfalfa and other grains.

Water is essential to the survival and progress of the Navajo Nation. The Navajo forest is a part of two major watersheds—the Little Colorado River and San Juan River Basins (Birtcher and Yazzie 1980). The water developments from the forest water are important for wildlife, livestock, irrigation, and recreation.

The Navajo Forest offers recreational opportunities throughout the year. The spring and summer activities most enjoyed by the Navajos, as well as visitors, are hiking, camping,

swimming, sightseeing, fishing, horseback riding, boating, picnicking, and outdoor sports. The colorful scenery, culture, and traditional lifestyle of the Navajo people are the highlights of the aesthetics. Recreational activities in the fall and winter include ice fishing, pinon nut gathering, the collection of firewood, and hunting for deer, turkey, and duck. (Henry and Yazzie 1981).

The Navajo Forest contains numerous sites or places of sacred or religious significance to the Navajo people. All such places are left undisturbed. The destruction or disturbance of such places clearly infringes upon the constitutionally guaranteed right of freedom of religion (Kemrer and Lord 1984). In Navajo mythology, the land was created by the Holy Ones. With deep respect for earthly and universal powers, the Navajos attributed sickness to evil; the harmony of the powers had to be restored through ceremonies as taught by the Holy Ones. It is through the "Blessing Way," that universal harmony is maintained, and all good things necessary to maintenance of Navajo life are sanctioned and embodied. (Yazzie 1983).

It is traditional belief that the earth is sacred. Chuska/Luchukai Mountains are considered to be especially important (Kemrer and Lord 1984). The Chuskas are believed to signify the body of a reclining man. There is a female counterpart to the west: Navajo Mountain forms the head of a reclining woman with her body formed by Black Mesa to the south. According to the medicine men informants, various spiritual and physical ailments are diagnosed to require either "male" or "female" treatment for their patients. These treatments may require either "male" or "female" medicines and/or ceremonies (Kemrer and Lord 1984). Therefore, sources for "male" medicine herbs are restricted to the "male mountain", the Chuskas. The sources for "Female" herbal medicines are found on the "female mountains"—Navajo mountain and Black Mesa. Other herbal medicines are collected from any mountains but only by religious/medical practitioners.

The coordination of the forest and range management practices are beginning to show increased total forest land values to be achieved for the Navajo Nation.

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