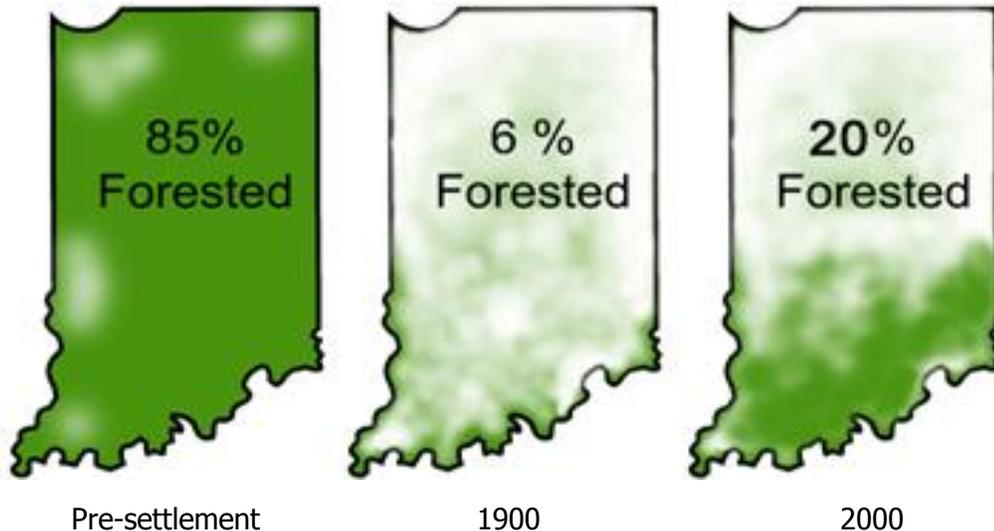




The Role of Harvesting on State Forests

Would you say that Indiana has more or less forestland today than it did in 1900? If you answered “more”, you are correct! In fact, today we have more than three times the amount of forestland than we did in 1900! Let’s look at a little history.

Prior to European settlement of Indiana, the state was approximately 87% forested. By 1900, clearing for agriculture and limitless harvesting of timber reduced the state’s forestland from nearly 20 million acres to about 1 ½ million acres. The road to recovery began on public lands in 1903 with the establishment of the State Forest System, and on private lands with passage of the Forest Classification Act in 1921. Today Indiana has more than 4.8 million acres of forestland- more than a 3 fold increase since 1900.



If the forests of Indiana prospered prior to settlement with no management, why not just leave them alone and allow Mother Nature to take care of them? There are a number of reasons, but they all stem from one thing—the dominant presence of human beings in our state. Our growing human population has, and continues to demand hundreds of products from our forests ranging from fiber for lumber and paper to chemicals used in medicines, foods and many household items. Given these growing demands, our forests would soon be depleted as they were by the early 1900’s if it weren’t for proper management. But aside from the demand for products, the expanded human presence has also introduced other factors that necessitate management. Natural debris in unmanaged forests accumulates, creating wildfire hazards that can have devastating results (as has been seen in some western states). With the increased presence of humans, our forests have become increasingly fragmented. Forest fragmentation has been linked to the rapid increase in invasive species we have seen in recent years, and can also impact wildlife diversity. So while “letting nature take its course” might be an adequate prescription for the common cold, maintaining healthy and productive forests requires a systematic, scientific approach by professionally trained foresters, based on the latest research.

Management of State Forests

The Indiana State Forest System was established in 1903 and has been actively managed since that time. When the state acquired what is now state forestland, most acreage was comprised of eroding farm fields, pasture, or cut-over timberland considered to be of little value. Most early management activities were to stop soil erosion and restore the productive potential of the land. Techniques used to manage forests evolved as the forests grew. Less emphasis was needed on tree planting and more emphasis was placed on managing new stands of trees. Management activities such as timber stand improvement and selective harvesting were used to upgrade the quality of the stands and increase tree growth. This emphasis on stand improvement continues today, with the goal of improving not only timber production, but all forest resources. The needs of society for wood and fiber are balanced with other intangible needs, while protecting natural and cultural resources of our forests.

Our State Forest System consists of more than 150,000 acres which is about 3% of the total forestland in Indiana and about 1/3 of the land managed by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. Our state forests conserve and protect all forest resources--watersheds, wildlife, herbaceous plants, archaeological sites, historic features, geological features, soil and trees. They serve as demonstrations of good forest stewardship and help train loggers and forest landowners in proper timber harvesting methods and other sound management practices. State Forest management follows scientific principles and has been recognized as meeting stringent international forest certification standards.

Management of Private Forestland

Private forest owners account for about 85% of Indiana's forestland, providing countless benefits to the people of Indiana. Their forests are the primary source of forest products fueling a major part of the state's economy, as well as providing the many other benefits we enjoy from forests. Of the nearly 4 million acres of private forestland in Indiana, about 722,000 acres (18%) is enrolled in the Classified Forest and Wildlands program.

Recognizing the fact that Indiana's privately owned forests produce these and many other benefits the State of Indiana offers a variety of programs to assist woodland owners in the management and care of their forests. The Division of Forestry's landowner assistance program provides publications for self-study, on-site visits from a forester, and much more for Hoosier landowners wanting to make the most of their forestland.

The Role of Harvesting

Indiana is blessed with fertile, productive soils, a temperate climate, and adequate rainfall at the right time of year. This combination of factors results not only in bumper crops of corn and soybeans, but also in some of the finest quality hardwood trees in the world. Just as a garden or crop field left untended will become overgrown and unproductive, so too will a forest. "Weed" trees will compete with the more desirable species and quality will decline.

While it's easy to understand the harvesting of timber for wood products, foresters also recognize how harvesting can be used to perpetuate healthy forests. Removing mature, defective or otherwise undesirable trees from the woods creates openings where sunlight can reach the forest floor, allowing shade-suppressed seedlings to thrive and dormant tree seed to germinate. As the diversity of tree and herbaceous plant species increases, wildlife diversity increases as well. Aside from any financial gain that might be realized from harvesting, these ecological benefits to forest health and productivity are even more significant.