

The Sensible Environmentalist

An Antidote To Urban Sprawl

DEAR DR. MOORE:
How much impact is urban sprawl having on our national forests?

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), North American forests expanded by 10 million acres during the 1990s, and about two million acres



Dr. Moore

over the past five years. This is mainly the result of advances in sustainable forestry and agriculture. Over the past 50 years, we have learned how to grow more food on less land, so we're actually farming fewer acres. As a result, many lands previously cleared for agriculture have now been reforested.

That's the good news.

The bad news is that urban sprawl is indeed a major problem. We've gone from a nation of farmers to one of subdivisions and two car garages, where the closest store is driving distance.

Across the country, new suburbs are consuming some of our best forests and farmland. They're outgrowing existing infrastructures, requiring (among other things) new roads, water treatment plants and sewage systems—and the rate of development is accelerating.

For example, a study conducted by the US EPA showed that 5,000 people left Baltimore City for the outskirts over a recent six month period, resulting in 3,000 new

septic permits and the loss of nearly 10,000 acres of forests and farmland. Unfortunately, this is not uncommon.

Population growth is the main culprit, but it's also clear that our attitudes and the way we have chosen to expand our cities are significant factors. Instead of building outward, which is energy intensive and creates vast amounts of pollution, we should use what we know about environmentally sustainable building practices to improve our cities and communities.

This is one of the principles behind "smart growth"—a philosophy supported by the EPA and many others. The idea is to plan development in a way that protects the environment, improves quality of life and strengthens communities. It includes things like walkable neighborhoods, a mix of housing, commercial and retail structures, and the preservation of open spaces and forest canopy. (North America may have as much forest cover now as it did 100 years ago, but this certainly isn't true of every community.) It also means directing development toward existing cities and towns. Smart growth is an antidote to urban sprawl that makes sense. For more information or to get involved, please visit www.smartgrowth.org.

Dr. Patrick Moore has been a leader of the environmental movement for more than 30 years. A co-founder of Greenpeace, he holds a PhD in ecology and a BSc in forest biology. Questions can be sent to Patrick@SensibleEnvironmental.com