*American Canopy - Trees, Forests, and the Making of a Nation*

Eric Rutkow

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Book review by Doug McLaren

On visits to the local library I always find myself heading for the natural science and history sections. When I find a book that includes both, I feel like I have scored high on the "must read list". *American Canopy* was a real catch. As you can imagine, none of the characters in the book had speaking parts, but as you will find as you read the book the trees found on America's soils certainly spoke as to the overall history and development of America.

Several years ago I attended a professional forestry meeting and the author, Eric Ruthow spoke on his book, *American Canopy*. Ruthow is a lawyer and then began working on a degree in history. His work in law involved environmental issues.

The first few lines of the dust cover sold me on this very interesting collection of stories about American's history and its relationship to trees. "Like many of us, historians have long been guilty of taking trees for granted. Yet the history of trees in America is no less remarkable than the history of the United States itself..." It reminded me of that old saying, "You can't see the forest for the trees".

Rutkow begins the book by telling of the intentional cutting in 1964 of one of America's oldest trees, a bristlecone pine, that when cut and measured for annual tree rings was nearly 5,000 years old. It was all done in the name of science and education. Upon cutting the tree, the untold history of America was unleashed and recorded in Rutkow's book. The book, immediately after the telling of the bristlecone pine, goes to 1524 when a visiting explorer from Europe sees the trees of America for the first time and records his words as, "These trees were the most useful thing the land had to offer." That was 1524. The history of America told by Rutkow is told by peeling back the pages of history by telling a story of a tree on each of these "peels" and its relationship to America's history.

America had the trees that all of Europe in the early years of discovery of America needed for the war ships that were being produced to fight the wars for controlling the oceans. The wood supply of Europe had been utilized to its maximum. Europe had a large population that relied on wood for building, eating and keeping from freezing to death. The resource in Europe had reached its end as America, and its boundless supply of trees, was being discovered. The first boats that came to America brought pioneers to tame the new world and returned to Europe filled with wood for the needs there. A small portion of history that Rutkow uncovers suggests that Britain may have lost the Revolutionary War simply due to the fact that they could not repair the masts on the ships due to the lack of trees, white pine, that was out of their reach during the war on the sea coast of New England.

The book continues to explore the true value of the trees in America including even medicines that the trees and the forests they grew in provide. The forests were also a hindrance as the pioneers progressed west. They were cut not only for the building of the cities and communities that began to be established but also simply cut and burned to make way for the countless immigrants that came. The forests also became the fortunes of many related industries. The railroads were a major contributor of the use of wood as well as a means to move people west to use them.

Rutkow discusses how the forests were altered not simply by the wholesale cutting but also by the insects and diseases that have in the past and present affected species populations. Rutkow uses the end of the book as a time to explain how lessons that were being taught and slowly learned throughout our history has provided us ample understanding the need and for approaches to sustainable management of the resource.

When I was reading this book, *American Canopy*, I was simply reminded of all these stories that I had heard during my career in the natural resource work that I have done over four decades. What I appreciated about Rutkow was his seamless interweaving of these stories, all told at one time in sequence, into a better understanding of the importance of America's valuable resource of timber and the value that it provides for the population of folks that use it - all of using trees in some way daily.

It is some 348 pages in length. I actually read it twice, the second time to create a power point presentation to utilize in forestry educational programming on many levels.