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## The Individual vs. the Public Interest: Political Ideology and National Forest Policy, Richard M. Alston

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## THE INDIVIDUAL VS. THE PUBLIC INTEREST: POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND NATIONAL FOREST POLICY

RICHARD M. ALSTON

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Discussions surrounding the Sagebrush Rebellion and its offspring, the concepts of "privatization" and "asset management," have underscored the point that at the core of many issues of forest policy are different assumptions about the proper scope of governmental authority and the relationship between individual and societal interests. The main protagonists—foresters, economists, and environmentalists—talk past one another often without recognizing the ideological, indeed religious, tenor of their arguments. In a provocative book, Richard Alston sheds light on the origins and evolution of these competing and conflicting ideologies and examines the possibility of creating a new, integrating ideology capable of striking a balance between a strictly individualistic and a strictly ecological point of view.

Beginning with the views of Plato and Aristotle on the ideal state, Alston takes his reader on a well-documented journey through the centuries, exploring the social and political changes that led from a traditional to a market society in the 16th and 17th centuries to the changes that today are marking the transition to an age of organization and information. Also explored in depth are the implications of the neoclassical economists' position that the public interest is nothing more than the sum of individual interests and is best served by unfettered markets. The atomistic society of the neoclassical economists is contrasted with the German influence on both forestry and economics, which lent credence to the view that society is an entity understandable apart from its individual members and that the state has a positive role to play in pursuing social objectives. The clash of these schools of thought is described in the emergence of modern forest economics and its struggles to define itself and the analytical contribution the new profession could make to resource management.

This history of ideas serves to illustrate the fact that facts do not speak for themselves; "truth" is a reflection of subjective analysis that is shaped and guided by ideological biases, biases that are rooted deeply in historical experiences and social development. In one respect, there is nothing new about Alston's message. Many other commentators have pointed out the consequences of analysts' failure to understand the value-laden assumptions of their disciplines. Why then should forest economists and other members of the natural resource community find Alston's book of value? Because the lesson apparently has not yet been learned. At a recent

meeting of forest economists, for example, repeated statements could be heard that the major problems of forest policy could be solved if only "correct" economic analysis could be applied. As Alston would reply: which economics, whose economics?

Because we are in an era of congressionally mandated interdisciplinary planning, there are cogent reasons to be aware of and sensitive to the different styles of thinking represented in multi-resource decisionmaking. If effective communication is to occur and a foundation laid for compromise and bargaining, members of interdisciplinary teams must be mindful of their own blind spots as well as of the motivations and cognitive modes of others. Alston provides an effective catalyst for such introspective examinations.

The problem for forest policy, however, is not just one of understanding the ideological heritage which divides foresters, economists, and environmentalists. For as Alston points out, while disciples of each ideology cling tenaciously to their beliefs, the ideologies are no longer applicable to the changing realities of the age of information and organization. What is needed is a new integration of ideas.

Alston places his faith in the planning process mandated by the Resources Planning Act and the National Forest Management Act (RPA/NFMA)—albeit recast significantly from current implementing practices—to accomplish the needed transformation. For example, Alston suggests that the Forest Service refocus public input from project to program (national) level decisions. But at risk of showing one's own disciplinary prejudices, significant institutional barriers stand in the way of such a proposal. Public input focuses on the project level precisely because it is here that tradeoffs are visible enough to enable public groups to muster the resources they need (large numbers of people with intensely held opinions, expertise on local needs and conditions, etc.) for effective participation. Moreover, debates surrounding project decisions also reflect a political system response to another philosophical dilemma in our society: how to reconcile national versus local interests.

While quibbling with Alston over the efficacy of certain aspects of his proposed solution, this is nevertheless a timely and readable work that should prompt healthy discussion and debate, and further the integrative learning process that RPA/NFMA planning has already begun.

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