

The Forestry *Source*

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Films Document the Return of the American Elm and the Need for Active Management in Ponderosa Pine Forests

By Joseph M. Smith, *Source* staff writer

In 2005, the US Forest Service released the documentary *The Greatest Good* as part of its centennial celebration. I found it to be a remarkable film for several reasons, not the least of which was that it was the first time I had ever seen forestry depicted on a screen, big or small. Since then, I've written three articles about the use of documentaries to create awareness of what forestry is, what foresters do, and why. This article is about two more forestry-related films that recently came to my attention.

The American Elm: Majestic, Imperiled, Renewed

Daniel C. Smith's relationship with the American elm began when he was a boy at his grandparents' house in Iowa.

"I can remember that at about age 10 as we were leaving his house one day, my grandfather said, 'The next time you visit this tree won't be here.'"

Smith didn't realize it at the time, but his grandfather's words signaled the beginning of Dutch elm disease in Iowa. Since then, Smith, vice-president of Community-Based Communications LLC, a communications firm in Cheverly, Maryland, and former vice-president of communications at American Forests, has witnessed and heard stories about the massive loss of elm trees in cities across the country. The experience moved him and, in 2004, he decided the impact of the disease on the American elm, as well as the tree's subsequent renewal, was a story that "deserved to be told." Smith's telling of that story came to life in 2007, in the form of a 49-minute documentary, *The American Elm: Majestic, Imperiled, Renewed*, that he produced with his wife, Cathy.

As its title implies, the documentary highlights the history of the American elm and how it became a fixture in towns and cities across the country as a result of its "nobility and arching grace"¹ and the fact that, prior to the 20th century, Americans had found few uses for its wood. It also looks at the arrival of Dutch elm disease around 1930 and the effect of the 1938 hurricane that exacerbated the problem in the Northeast; the spread of the disease during and after World War II; the efforts of municipalities to contain the disease in the 1960s and 1970s and the advent of urban forestry programs; experimentation of disease-resistant cultivars, such as the Princeton American and Jefferson elms; the efforts of urban and community forestry programs to replant and re-establish elm trees in some of the areas hit hardest by the disease, such as New England, Minnesota, and Washington, DC; and the ecosystem and other benefits of planting elms and other large trees in urban areas (see the urban forestry news article on the back page of this edition).

Although the documentary was released more than five years ago



A scene from *Saving Our Forests: Ponderosa Pine Forests in Peril*.

(and has been appearing on screens large and small ever since), I became aware of it in mid-January, when a member of a local environmental group informed me that it was to be shown in a local church. I went and, a week after the screening, interviewed Smith about making the film and the use of documentaries to promote urban forestry.

Making the documentary, said Smith, was more difficult than he had anticipated.

"I had been involved in film projects before. I had done a lot of assisting and support for people doing documentaries and doing film projects for issues that I was working on, but it was more complex than expected," he said. "There is a lot of juggling of pieces and processes, and the completion of it was somewhat daunting, especially because it was something that I wasn't doing full time—I was doing it in addition to other work."

Despite the headaches, Smith said the effort it took to make an engaging film was well worth it.

"Film has the ability to capture some of the energy and emotion behind a story and can more directly connect with an individual," he said. "There is also something about video and interviewing people and being engaged and getting people's involvement and attention. It becomes more of a group or community process when others are involved and they see themselves as part of the story. So I think that the potential for these stories to be heard and to evolve and to go viral is something that film brings to it."

So how have audiences reacted to the film?

"We've had a good response to it," said Smith. "The number of stories that are out there is just amazing, so one of the things the

documentary has enabled us to do is to go out and start the conversation. People have strong personal connections to and stories about trees in their lives, such as from when they were young. We've been able to bring that out, to see that and hear that from people."

People working in urban forestry, natural resources, or the environment ought to be aware of those connections, he said, because it offers a way to bond with the public.

"Some of us have had these experiences, and they've shaped our careers and our work. Other people have them as well, and they are there to be nurtured and pulled out, and we should remember that," he said. "Letting them tell [these stories] is important and can let us build support and coalitions."

To that end, Smith and his wife are always willing to help spread the word about *The American Elm*.

"We distributed this film. We sent it out to the nonprofit urban forestry community and urged them to use it, we showed it at some film festivals and used it at some educational programs for different nonprofit groups, but it's now been a couple of years since that initial attention," he said. "We're interested in continuing and maybe restarting the effort, because it's been dormant for a couple of years, so we'll be looking for other interest and opportunities to show it to new audiences."

The American Elm: Majestic, Imperiled, Renewed was supported in part with a grant from the Northeast Region of the US Forest Service upon recommendation of the National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council. For more information about the documentary and the comeback of the American elm, visit <http://theamericanelm.net>.

Saving Our Forests: Ponderosa Pines in Peril

Whereas *The American Elm* tells the story of the decimation and resurgence of a particular tree species, and the work that people are doing to bring it back, *Saving Our Forests: Ponderosa Pines in Peril*, is a short film (9 minutes) about the decline of ponderosa pine forests, the impact of that decline on rural communities, and how active forest management and the resurgence of local timber markets can save both.

"Conditions in our overstocked ponderosa pine forests are severe, but it's not too late to save them. Active management is needed. Treatments like thinning and prescribed burning can help prevent catastrophic wildfire and protect trees from drought, disease, and insects.... In addition to removing small trees and underbrush, some large trees will also need to be harvested. In trying to protect our old-growth forests, we have actually put them at greater risk," says the film's narrator. "These projects will encourage new restoration-based businesses and help revitalize the traditional timber industry."

To find out more about the film, I contacted Irene Jerome, the film's executive producer, and asked her why the film was made.

"The county that I live in is very rural, and most people who live in it are onboard and they understand the issues," Jerome said. "But I read the media that comes out and I wonder, how do we reach a different, more urban audience?"

Yet Jerome wanted to do something different from all the other forestry videos she'd seen.

"When I looked at the videos that were out there about forest issues, they seemed didactic—a forester standing out in the woods, droning on—and I could see how they would turn people

off or how people wouldn't take the time to watch them. Then I took a look at what the environmental groups have done. They base theirs more on emotion," she said. "We decided we should do something different, so we tried to find something that was soothing, that would catch people's attention and hold it, so we used beautiful photos and imagery to get people to buy into the ideas without preaching at them and driving them off."

The answer, Jerome decided, was a short film that could be posted online, where she could get the most bang for the buck.

"This is the electronic age and we can't afford a big media campaign for TV, so what else can you do? If you do a magazine ad, how do you reach the broader public? Magazines are typically focused on a particular audience or they are so expensive and your ad runs only one time," she said. "This stays on there, so it's getting the message out and keeping it out. It's about trying to get beyond the people that already know about it to those that don't have a clue."

To make the film, Jerome approached her county officials, explained her idea, and they awarded her a grant. Then, she found some local people with expertise in videography, scriptwriting, and marketing to help her make the film. Eighteen months later, the film was completed.

Ultimately, the message she says she'd like audiences to take away from the film is that forestry is more complex than it appears.

"[Forestry] isn't just greedy timber companies and people cutting down their trees for profit. There's a reason for what we're doing, and if we're going to sustain our forests for the future, then we have to do something, or we're not going to have them," Jerome said. "I'd also like people to know that wood products are renewable, they're sustainable—they're fantastic. People don't get that. We want them to stop and to think and to ask more questions."

Since its final release in 2012, the film has reached a broad audience and that the response to it has been "quite positive," she said.

Should foresters in other communities want to emulate her efforts, Jerome offers the following advice.

"Think carefully about your objective and your target market. That was one of the things we did, based on the advice of experts. We looked at a lot of films and we said to ourselves, who is this targeted at? In most of them, it's hard to discern that. That's it: think about what you're doing," she said. "The other thing is to think about the length of what you're producing and what you're trying to achieve. In this day and age, we're flooded with information everyday. You need to make something that's powerful so it sticks; otherwise it just comes and goes."

To watch *Saving Our Forests: Ponderosa Pines in Peril*, or for more information about the film and how it was made, visit www.savingourforests.com.

Sources

1. "American elm," Wikipedia.org, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_elm.