

How Old Is Our Forest?

New Hampshire's forests, which began establishing themselves more than 2,000 years ago, have gone through many life cycles. People have harvested wood, natural disasters have leveled forests, and age and disease have contributed to the natural succession of the forest. While New Hampshire has had forests for quite a long time, most of the state's trees are fairly young; typically less than 100 years old.

In the Northeast, our forests regenerate naturally. Young trees successfully sprout and grow to replace dead, fallen, and harvested trees, without needing people to plant them.

Since Early Settlement

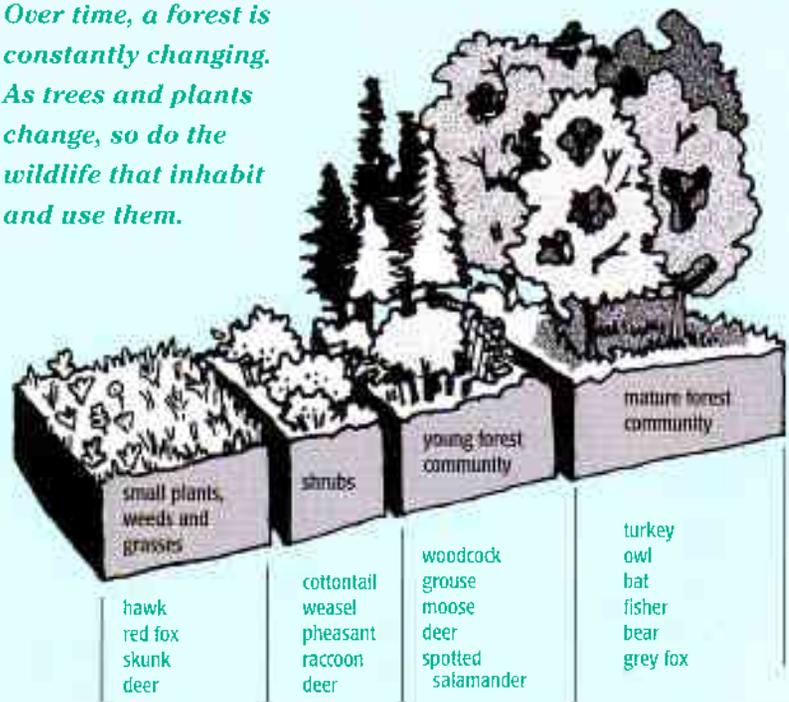
Forest covered more than 90% of New Hampshire in 1600. During the next two and a half centuries of settlement, people cleared away half the forest to create farmland. By 1850, forest land was reduced to 45% statewide. Then, in the mid-1800s, people abandoned their farms for better agricultural land in the west and greater economic opportunity in the city.

Gradually, trees sprouted again in the fields, eventually returning much of the landscape to forest. In the early 1900s, many of these regenerated forests were cut again when New Hampshire entered its heaviest period of timber cutting. Today about 200 million board feet of timber are cut each year; twice as much was cut annually in the early 1900s. Since that period ended, the state has returned to 85% forest, making it the second most forested state after Maine.

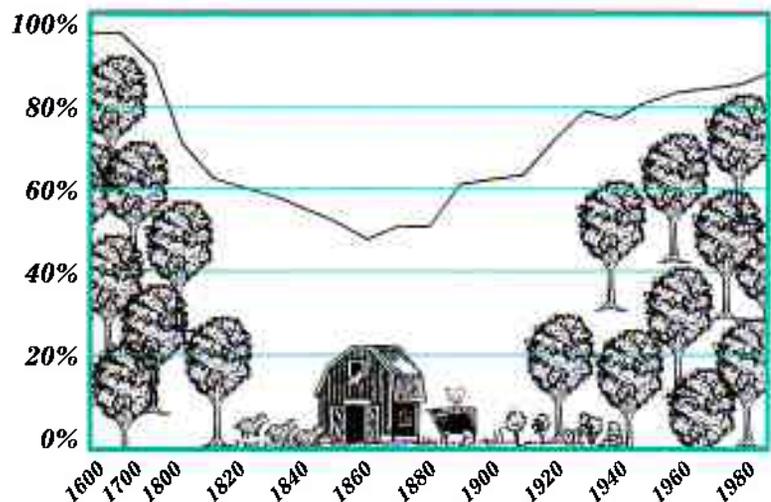
In 1950, New Hampshire had approximately 500 sawmills; today there are about 100. Today's mills produce as much lumber as in 1950 with improved machinery and more efficient log use.

SUCCESSION OF A FOREST

Over time, a forest is constantly changing. As trees and plants change, so do the wildlife that inhabit and use them.

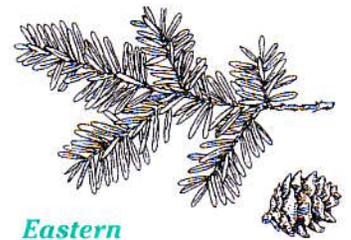


Forest Land Cover in New Hampshire 1600-1990



Old Growth Forests

The state has about 3,000 acres of old growth forest in a dozen locations. *Old growth forests* are forests that have escaped harvesting or other human modification over the last 350 years. Most of the trees in old growth forests are hemlock, spruce, sugar maple, yellow birch, and beech. The state's old growth forests today are just a fraction of what they once were.



Eastern Hemlock

Natural Disasters

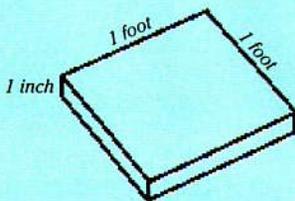
Natural disasters have affected New Hampshire's forests over time. Three events this century are noteworthy: the 1903 forest fires, the 1938 hurricane, and the 1998 ice storm. The hurricane of 1938 blew down 1 billion board feet of timber in the state. To save the timber for future use, downed logs were stored in ponds and lakes, which protected them from stain, rot, and insects. The timber was eventually used in World War II as wooden boxes and for other wood products.

While lakes and ponds stored logs, rivers were used to float them to mills. During spring high water flow, river drives were a common way of transporting logs to sawmills and pulp mills. River drives and underwater log storage were prohibited with the passage of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1972.

Question

On average, it takes 14,660 board feet of timber to build a single-family home in the United States today. How many houses could be built from the trees harvested today? From the blowdown of the 1938 hurricane?

Answer: (13,642 in 1998; 68,213 homes in 1938)



One "board foot" is equal to a piece of lumber that is 1 foot long by 1 foot wide by 1 inch thick.

To help interpret the information on this factsheet, turn to the *Project Learning Tree PreK-8 Activity Guide!*

PLT Activity #40: Then and Now

Communities today are quite different than 100, 50, 25, or even five years ago. In this activity, students will understand how we, as people, affect and alter the environment in which we live.

PLT Activity #80: Nothing Succeeds Like Succession

Succession is a natural pattern of change that takes place over time in a forest or ecosystem. In this activity, students study the connection between plants, animals, and successional stages in local ecosystems.

Fun Fact



The oldest known tree, a black gum tree in southern New Hampshire, is about 550 years old; the next oldest tree, found in the White Mountain National Forest, is about 415 years old.

