

# Institute for Natural Resources



## Feature Story

### Michael P. Nelson: The Ecological Philosopher



**Dr. Michael P. Nelson**  
Forest Ecosystems & Society  
Oregon State University



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by **Zachary Bolick**, *INR Policy Research Intern. OSU Masters of Public Policy*

Michael Nelson isn't your run-of-the-mill ecological researcher. He doesn't fall neatly into traditional natural science fields like biology, ecology, or botany. Rather, the newly hired Ruth H. Spaniol Chair in Natural Resources and Lead Principal Investigator of the HJ Andrews Experimental Forest for OSU is, among other things, an environmental scholar, writer, ethicist, and most of all, philosopher.

Attempting to describe Nelson is like trying to pick up mercury with a fork. The environmental philosopher and ethicist carries an aura of ease about him that is often punctuated by his affable energy. Yet behind Nelson is an unswerving conviction that collaboration and new relationships are the key to solving some

of today's most pressing environmental problems. As he puts it, "We're at this point where everybody wants to dance but we're like the junior high kids lined up at the wall, and we need the teacher to come and say ok Tommy, you dance with Susie and get over it. We all want to do this, but nobody wants to look foolish."

Raised in Janesville, Wisconsin, Nelson grew up in a small blue-collar factory town, perhaps best known for being the birthplace of Congressman Paul Ryan. He earned his Bachelor of Arts, Master of Arts and doctorate in philosophy from the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, Michigan State University and the University of Lancaster, respectively. However, it wasn't until he finished his master's studies that he became interested

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in environmental questions and issues. Much of this he attributes to his years working as the resident philosopher on the Isle Royale Wolf Project, a position he holds to this day. “At a certain point my thoughts about what my work was and who my audience was really started to change and I started thinking that I’m not just writing for my colleagues in philosophy. I’m thinking about real problems in the world and how to deal with those,” says Nelson. This determination to put knowledge into practice is a theme that has characterized his entire career.

*Argumentative analysis...is a critical tool that must be used in conjunction with good science, empathy, and collaboration.*

Perhaps for this reason, he frequently mentions the importance of applied conservation ethics in science. He is explicit about how argumentative analysis can help lead to better environmental decision-making by identifying gaps in scientific knowledge and generating common ground among stakeholders. It’s not a silver bullet for conservation decisions, as he frankly admits that there is often no one correct answer. Instead, it is a critical tool that must be used in conjunction with good science, empathy and collaboration. “We’re going to have to get better at other disciplines in a way and borrow on the expertise of other disciplines. Sometimes what we count as examples of collaborative success are really quite modest,” says Nelson. To hammer his point home, he uses the example of a fish biologist who realizes that fish live in streams and, as a result, decides to collaborate with a stream ecologist. It is an example he calls upon frequently and to great effect.

When asked about his time thus far at OSU and with the HJ Andrews, Nelson’s face lights up with an almost infectious grin as he answers, “You know my head spins all the time, there’s so much stuff, but it’s still so fun. I think one of the reasons they were interested in having me is that there is this moment in time where the arts and humanities program has become a program of a lot of interest to people. You have your biophysical stuff, your science stuff, and your

humanities stuff. The question is how do you put those things together?”

Yet Nelson does not view the Andrews as merely a research site where scientists can bounce ideas off of one another. He also sees it as a physical place where people can get together to have difficult conversations about environmental issues, always with an eye on policy. “Often the science that needs to be done would fit on a note card,” says Nelson. “We think it’s all about the science and then we realize that policy doesn’t work that way.”

For the Institute for Natural Resources, Nelson’s presence may prove to be invaluable over the next several years. “Where INR will be able to draw on a certain constituent base, the Andrews might have a slightly different constituent base, but what’s really neat is if somehow the two groups could be leaders and bring what is a huge constituent base together to foster conversations,” says Nelson.

Whatever direction he decides to take the HJ Andrews in, one thing remains certain: Nelson will continue to expand the boundaries of ecological research and emphasize the important role of ethics in helping to analyze complex environmental issues. Because as he puts it, “Right now we’re facing what are fundamentally not biological questions anymore. Instead they’re ethical questions.”

