Young Forester Advocates for Action in Healing Forests

Shaped by a treeless island's community spirit, forester Amelia Napper helps people experience Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic firsthand.

RUTLAND, VT, UNITED STATES, September 21, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Forester Amelia Napper is challenging a common misconception: that the best way to care for a forest is to leave it alone. A new Land Ethic in Action story from the Aldo Leopold Foundation follows Napper, of the Ruffed Grouse Society and American Woodcock Society, as she helps landowners and community members understand why active stewardship, including canopy openings, young forest creation, and carefully planned treatments, is often essential to healthy wildlife habitat and resilient forests.

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> *Karl Malcolm, vice president of conservation, RGS & AWS*

On a windy day in the Green Mountain National Forest, Napper watched a group of cautious landowners climb the trail behind her. Her training at Yale taught her to read northern hardwood stands through maps, soils and data. Her childhood on a remote Alaskan island taught her that change is easier to face when people understand it together.

Napper, 28, grew up on Unalaska Island in the Aleutian chain, where the only trees are a few Sitka spruce planted more than two centuries ago by Russian fur traders. Forests, for her, were something she had to leave home to see.
Today, she partners with the U.S. Forest Service on public lands to explain a counterintuitive but urgent idea: in some forests, leaving the land alone can allow habitat to decline.

Karl Malcolm, vice president of conservation for RGS & AWS, said public understanding begins with forest history. The woods European settlers encountered were not static or uniform, he said, but shaped by animals, people and disturbance.

What may appear to be untouched wilderness, Malcolm said, is often a forest missing the forces that once kept it varied and resilient.
"When the first European settlers arrived on the East Coast, they did not arrive in some massive, homogeneous, pristine forest," Malcolm said. "They found a complex system shaped by elk, bison, beavers, passenger pigeons and Indigenous fire."

With many of those forces reduced or removed, Malcolm said active management can help restore the diversity that once developed naturally.
RGS & AWS is working with members, agencies and the public to build support for active forest management. The organization says hands-off conservation alone cannot maintain the mix of habitats many forest species need, including ruffed grouse, American woodcock and other wildlife associated with young forest conditions.

For Napper, that work happens one conversation at a time, often in the forest.

“I’ve developed more of an understanding of the relationships that come into play with all of these ecosystems, and how we fit into that puzzle,” says Napper.

In the Green Mountain National Forest, those choices carry new urgency. Beech leaf disease is spreading in Vermont, threatening trees that feed deer, bears, ruffed grouse and other wildlife. Creating openings for young oaks, Napper said, can help protect that food web and prepare the forest for future stress.
The challenge is not only ecological. Forest treatments can look disruptive before their benefits are visible, making public trust essential. Napper said that trust grows when people can stand in the woods, ask questions and see how science-based decisions are made.

“Public land is everyone’s land,” Napper said. Bringing people into the forest helps them understand how management decisions are made and experience their effects firsthand. “The more people we get out there knowing and learning about what’s happening, the better we’re able to share our stories.”
Napper said outreach is most effective when it happens on the land itself. Forestry, she said, is not simply about timber. It involves choices made by foresters, botanists, soil scientists and wildlife biologists working toward long-term land health.

Across the region, habitat for ruffed grouse, American woodcock and other forest species has declined as fire suppression and reduced timber harvests have limited young forest growth. Where prescribed fire is constrained, foresters often use mechanical treatments to mimic some of its ecological effects.
RGS & AWS partners with agencies and landowners on targeted forest management, including timber sales for the U.S. Forest Service. Surplus funds are reinvested in habitat work such as prescribed fire, invasive plant removal and road-stream crossing improvements.

"Active stewardship—using prescribed fire and ecologically sound mechanical vegetation management to mimic those lost forces—is how we save these species," said Malcolm. "What we're ultimately trying to do here is find ways to redeem our responsibilities to the places that we love. It’s about helping leave these forest ecosystems in a state that's going to be better for wildlife and for people well into the future."

The full Land Ethic in Action story invites readers to look beyond short-term disruption and consider what forests, wildlife and communities need for the future. Together, Napper’s fieldwork and Malcolm’s forest-history perspective make the case that active stewardship is not a departure from conservation—it is one of the ways communities can practice it.

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