Why The Controversy Over Aspen

From the boreal forest in the north to central Mexico and from the Pacific Coast to New England, quaking aspen is the most widespread tree species on the continent. Media often trumpets the impending doom of aspen in the American West, yet we can still see thriving aspen forests accenting high elevation conifer and meadow landscapes that surround us. How should we resolve the diverging narratives of this regional icon? Why are aspen important to a wide spectrum of natural resource disciplines, not the least of which includes range management?

Groves of "quakies" provide rich biodiversity, water storage, wildlife habitat, protection from fire, and recreation and esthetic uses. It also provides forage for domestic livestock and wildlife. In Utah, disagreements have arisen over how to manage grazing animals on public lands that will allow aspen stands to regenerate. It is important for us to understand what is happening to aspen in the West, what factors positively and negatively affect their well-being, and what management steps can be taken to increase ecosystem resilience. As with many complex natural resource issues, restoration of historical impacts, as well as addressing competing modern interests, requires informed participation by a wide contingent of stakeholders.

Before we dive deeper into aspen ecology and issues, it is important that readers understand two key concepts. First, aspen reproduce both asexually via root suckers and sexually from seed germination. Thus, large groups of aspen trees may be genetically identical clones, many of them still attached by underground root networks. Conventional management practices rely heavily on strong suckering responses following burning or cutting. Second, aspen come in two primary forms: seral (meaning they are relatively short-lived and eventually overtopped by competing conifers) and stable (not competing with conifers; long-term growth in pure or nearly pure stands of aspen). Understanding these different aspen "functional types" is crucial to restorative efforts, otherwise well-intended actions may lead to aspen loss.

- Are We Losing Our Aspen?
- Fire Ecology in Aspen Forests
- Forage: Livestock and Wildlife
- Placing Value on Aspen Ecosystems
- Aspen Management Options

Download the following Western Aspen Alliance Briefs

- Managing ungulate browsing for sustainable aspen
- Building resilience in quaking aspen management

Want information on current and past aspen research studies:

- An Annotated Bibliography on Aspen Herbivory
- Aspen Bibliography

There's even more info on aspen at the Western Aspen Alliance website