Forest Health

What is a Healthy Forest?

It is easy to think that a forest is healthy if it has lots of trees, but this isn’t always the case. Just as a doctor needs to know a person’s medical history to make a diagnosis, we need to understand the history of a forest to tell what is “healthy” for that forest.

If all of the plants, animals and natural processes historically found in a forest are still present and functioning normally, then that forest is likely to stay healthy.

If some of these pieces are missing – or, if others are added that weren’t there when the forest was evolving – that forest becomes unbalanced, supporting fewer species of plants, insects, mammals and birds.

A Picture of Health

Natural disturbances create the spaces that support the plant and animal life needed to maintain a healthy, balanced ecosystem. Our forests can be “pictures of health” if the natural disturbances that historically shaped them are allowed to continue.

- **Fire** – creates a mosaic where old, mature trees give way to new growth of varying age, species and composition.
- **Disease and insects** – recycle weakened trees, allowing sunlight and nutrients to nourish new plants on the forest floor.
- **Avalanches & Debris Slides** – create gaps in the forest cover, creating new wildlife habitat.

Natural Disturbance: Nature’s Multivitamin

**Natural Disturbance** (n.):
1. a natural event (e.g. fire, insects, disease, floods, wind, avalanches, debris slides) that shapes the landscape over time.

In the same way that vitamins can help to keep us healthy, **natural processes or disturbances** can help to maintain forest health, as long as they mimic the natural processes that historically shaped the forest.