



Published on Campaign for America's Wilderness (<http://www.leaveitwild.org>)

Taking control of the machine

High Country News (CO)

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Monday, July 13, 2009

DEER LODGE, MONTANA: Sherm Anderson got into the timber business when he was about 9 years old, spending his spare time working in a small mill and on logging crews run by his father. At 15, he began driving log trucks. At 30, he borrowed from a bank to buy a bulldozer for scraping loggers' roads and started his own company in this small blue-collar town. In his no-wasted-words manner, he says, "It just kind of grew from there."

On a wind-carved day in early June, Anderson shows me around the company he grew -- Sun Mountain Lumber, Inc. At 62, he's lean and gray-haired, wearing a denim shirt, blue jeans and work boots. "Sherm" is engraved on his leather belt. We don hardhats and safety glasses, and he leads me through the mazelike sawmill, planer mill and finger-joint mill, which turn trees into the 2-by-4 studs used for framing buildings. The tour continues through his 40,000-square-foot maintenance shop and the yards that hold dozens of his logging vehicles.

Anderson is proud that Sun Mountain Lumber is the largest private enterprise in a three-county area, employing more than 300 people when it's running full blast. He carries on the family tradition by employing his two sons and their wives and his daughter's husband. He's also an industry dean: He served as president of the American Loggers Council and the Montana Logging Association in the 1990s and travels to industry confabs as far away as Kazakhstan, whose forests are similar to Montana's.

Right now, though, Sun Mountain struggles to survive. It's run "in red ink" for three years, Anderson says, and lately he's had to cut back some of his crews. The national economic slump is just one of the reasons for that; the biggest problem, in his view, is the national forest system.

Environmentalists' lawsuits and the U.S. Forest Service have choked off timber sales in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, which sprawls across 3.3 million acres surrounding the town. They had their reasons; previous logging had shredded some of the forest, for instance. But it's hurt Anderson's operation. Back in the 1980s, more than 90 percent of the timber he processed came from federal land; now, less than 5 percent does. His costs have increased "tremendously" because he has to pull logs from distant state, private and tribal forests, while bidding against other mills equally desperate for timber.

Dozens of Montana mills have closed under the strain. "The economy is cyclical -- ups and downs. Always has been. Timber supply is what's taking 'em out now," Anderson says. "A lot of people depend on this company for their livelihood, so we'll keep on doing this as long as we can."

All of that is somewhat predictable news to anyone who tracks forest issues. What's surprising is the logo

on a cap that Anderson keeps on a shelf beside his desk: MONTANA WILDERNESS ASSOCIATION. It symbolizes Anderson's dramatic shift into collaboration. He's trying to lead Montana's timber industry into a ground-breaking deal with the statewide wilderness group and two national environmental groups.

They call it the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership, but it's not as warm and fuzzy as it sounds. They've hammered out some bold goals, determined to make both the Forest Service and more hard-line environmentalists agree to them. They want increased logging, contentious restoration projects and controversial wilderness designations that would break a 26-year-long gridlock in Montana's wilderness politics.

Basically, while Anderson and his partners wouldn't state it so frankly, they want to run a national forest. They might not succeed, but their determination is shared by others around the West who want new directions in forest management. The status quo is so bad, many think it's time for some big experiments.

No one has managed the national forests very successfully. For most of the last century, the Forest Service and the industry ran the system -- 193 million acres, mostly in the West -- like a timber farm. They suppressed natural wildfires and cut most of the big old-growth timber. Their mistakes provided environmentalists with an opportunity to push key forest-conservation laws through Congress in the 1960s and 1970s. Other competing interest groups, such as off-road vehicle drivers, have emerged to make forest management increasingly complicated.

Environmentalists have become the most powerful interest group in the national forests. They've protected more than 36 million acres of the forests as wilderness areas, and placed another 58 million acres more or less off-limits through the Clinton administration's "roadless rule." (That rule is still being hashed out in the courtrooms, but national heavyweights like The Wilderness Society keep up the pressure for its enforcement.) They also force the Forest Service and the other interest groups to run most proposed actions through detailed analyses of environmental impacts. That requirement -- as then-Chief Forester Dale Bosworth said in 2002 -- has led to "analysis paralysis."

Meanwhile, the national forests are a mess -- prone to record-breaking fires because of unnatural thickets and climate change, choked by insect infestations, weeds and regulations. The off-road drivers add to the chaos, claiming turf even in "roadless" forests, because the roadless rule doesn't limit their traffic. Many forest-dependent species are declining, and pretty much everyone agrees there's a huge need for some kind of "landscape-scale restoration" -- the new buzzword.

The Forest Service says 60 million to 80 million acres need restoration. But the agency seems to have trouble getting out of bed every morning. It suffers chronic budget crises and its top leadership has gone through unprecedented turnover. It's had four chief foresters in the last 10 years, including the brand-new chief, Tom Tidwell, who was just promoted to the job by the Obama administration. "Too many (in the agency) have lost the hope and belief that things can get better," Ron Thatcher -- head of the Forest Service Council, which represents 20,000 staffers -- told a congressional committee four months ago. "Such employees can become cynical and disengaged. ..." Thatcher says morale is the worst he's seen in more than 30 years with the agency, according to the Washington Post.

The timber industry -- the traditional provider of equipment and manpower for lumber production -- is also needed now to do the forest restoration. But the industry is staggering, barely on its feet. Logging on Western public lands (including those under the Bureau of Land Management) has declined about 90 percent since the excessive cutting in the 1980s. Hundreds of mills have closed around the West, and the industry's capacity to process wood in the region has declined by 45 percent. Free-market capitalism caused many of the industry's problems, including heavy competition from Canadian and tropical forests and the housing market's collapse.

That's the context for what Sherm Anderson faces in Montana. Unfortunately, the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest is especially difficult to deal with: Originally two forests that were married in 1996 in an attempt to save money, it lies scattered in pieces over 18 mountain ranges, within the boundaries of no less than seven different counties.

Several small environmental groups still fight the timber war here. They've challenged nearly every commercial timber sale this decade. Not only has the harvest been reduced to a trickle, but more than 870,000 acres are infested with mountain pine beetles and other insects. Another 150,000 acres have been charred by recent fires, and those acres are getting very little reseeded and erosion control. A 240-acre salvage sale of beetle-killed pines -- in which loggers would walk in with chainsaws and cut only dead trees, with the logs removed by helicopter -- has been tied up in analysis and legal battles for more than four years.

The forest's staffing is down 30 percent since 2003, according to a "general management review" last year. There's a lot of turnover in district rangers and the top job, forest supervisor, has changed hands three times in the past four years. The review found "ongoing confusion because it's never quite clear how roles and responsibilities line up." Staffers quoted in it described the forest's leadership team as "dysfunctional" and plagued by "back-stabbing." There's "not enough commitment and follow through ... No one is held accountable and the forest just continues to carry projects into the future," the review found.

There's a long list of local restoration projects that are needed to help wildlife such as native trout, wolverines and the occasional grizzly bear. Many areas in the forest have five miles of roads per square mile because of past harvests -- and that much access puts too much stress on wildlife, biologists say. "More than 140 culverts need replacing because they block fish movement. Stream channels need fixing and we need to get roads off streams," says Bruce Farling, head of Trout Unlimited's Montana council. Roads erode sediment into streams, and some local fish populations are dying.

It seems inevitable that someone would experiment with running things differently in this forest. The inspiration came in a 2005 congressional hearing on Montana's forest crisis, held in Missoula. Anderson, who'd battled environmentalists in the past, testified that he'd changed. As he puts it, "(Industry's) past practices were not the greatest. Things have changed, but some people haven't, and they think we're still raping and pillaging like in the old days." That surprised Montana Wilderness Association leaders Tim Baker and John Gatchell, who met Anderson at the hearing. "He's very thoughtful, very open-minded," Baker says.

The Montana Wilderness Association -- one of the oldest statewide wilderness groups, founded in 1958 -- was also frustrated and ready to try something new. The group had made repeated efforts to negotiate with the timber industry since the 1980s, but hadn't managed to get new wilderness areas designated. Watching the revival of wilderness politics in many compromise deals in other states, the group's board went through a shakeup in 2004, and in 2005 the realigned board brought in Baker as the new executive director, to bring a fresh approach to collaboration.

The MWA leaders talked with Anderson and visited his timber operation. As Anderson would say, it just kind of grew from there. Two more environmental groups joined the talks -- the National Wildlife Federation, represented by Tom France, who runs NWF's Northern Rockies office in Missoula, and Trout Unlimited, represented by Farling. Those groups had a track record of negotiating deals to protect wildlife by buying out grazing permits and gas leases.

Anderson brought in two more Montana timber companies and two manufacturers of particle-board and cardboard. Altogether, the companies employ several thousand people. The Montana Wilderness Association has about 5,000 members; Trout Unlimited has 3,200 in Montana and 150,000 nationwide, and the National Wildlife Federation has more than 4 million.

The negotiating table was in the Missoula office of a consulting firm that works with the timber industry. There, the representatives pored over maps and computer displays that detailed the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest's slopes, soil types and other conditions. They brought in consultants from the wider industry and from the national environmental movement. They roughed out the geographic boundaries and language for a proposed deal and then took it on the road, making hundreds of presentations to local governments, business groups, ATV and snowmobile groups, hunters and anglers, county fairs and other venues. Anderson stood beside the environmentalists and told the often-conservative audiences, "I'm a Republican, and a principle of our party is, 'Control our own destiny.' "

In other words: Let's take charge of the forest.

In response to feedback, the partners adjusted boundaries and language. They got endorsements from county governments, unions and other groups.

These are the current basics of their proposal: They want to "reduce gridlock and promote local cooperation and collaboration" in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. They want new wilderness designations for 571,000 acres in 15 sections of the forest, plus about 58,000 acres in four pieces of nearby BLM land. They want "landscape-scale restoration" in much of the rest of the forest through stewardship contracts, a special, fairly new method for funding such work.

Each stewardship contract would bundle timber with various restoration tasks, such as removing old roads, fixing culverts and reducing the risk of big fires; companies would bid for the contracts and do the restoration while cutting trees. They promise it would be logging-lite: No tree-cutting within 300 feet of streams, and all new roads would be temporary -- used for a few years, and then most traces removed.

In return, loggers would get more efficient analysis of environmental impacts and a guaranteed flow of timber. The analysis for the stewardship contracts would be done in big chunks -- 50,000 acres or more in one bureaucratic swoop, lumping many projects together. Loggers would get access to 7,000 acres per year for 10 years, compared to about 1,300 acres per year this decade, which has been eked out through plans and lawsuits, not by guarantees. Anderson expects the increased acreage to yield 35 million board-feet of lumber or more per year, as opposed to the 9 million board-feet harvested annually in recent years.

Formal "advisory committees" -- made up of environmentalists, loggers and other stakeholders -- would shape the stewardship projects and related logging. They would help monitor results and tune management accordingly.

They took their proposal to Montana's Sen. Jon Tester, because their agreement will need congressional approval to designate wilderness and override the Forest Service in various ways. Tester, a Democrat who won the seat in 2006 by a few thousand votes, needs to work the political center and deliver noticeable results to get re-elected. Tester has been evaluating and fine-tuning the proposal for months; his office is very close-mouthed, but insiders say that he'll probably introduce a package of wilderness proposals in the Senate soon. And the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership probably won't get everything it wants.

While the partners have tried to think strategically, the unwieldiness of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge forest and the whole system has worked against them.

They kept their core of negotiators small to make it easier to come to an agreement and bypass conflicts with some who were not at the table. That led to complaints about the process as well as the details of the agreement.

Kerry White, the head of Citizens for Balanced Use, a hard-line group for off-road drivers and other forest users, is one of the loudest critics. White, who calls wilderness "the landscape of no use," says the

partnership's agreement would "devastate" communities that rely on motorized access in areas that would be designated wilderness. In the past, he's denounced environmentalists who want to restrict off-road driving as "eco-terrorists." Some other off-road driving groups adopt a similar tone. If they'd been at the negotiating table, probably there would be no agreement.

Several county commissions also don't like the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership's proposal; that seems inevitable, with so many counties directly affected by it. They want it scaled down to designate much less wilderness.

The most sweeping criticism comes from the left wing of the environmental movement, including the small groups that file the lawsuits against the local timber sales. They oppose nearly every aspect of the deal. It's just "a few multimillion-dollar conservation organizations that got together with a handful of timber mills," says Matthew Koehler, head of one of the lawsuit-filers, WildWest Institute in Missoula. His group, which consists of two part-time staffers, has recently gotten involved in some collaborative efforts for thinning forests near communities, but if he'd been at the Beaverhead-Deerlodge negotiating table, he says, there would be no guarantee of timber to the mills.

"(The partnership) excluded everybody else from their process," Koehler says. "They have an incredible amount of political influence and they did some political calculus to get some wilderness designated. I think public-lands management is more important than to have it dealt with like every other issue in this country -- which is basically 'the haves' versus 'the have-nots.' "

The forest's wilderness qualities actually make compromise more difficult. It already has two wilderness areas totaling 220,000 acres, and there's great potential for more -- two congressionally established wilderness-study areas that total 210,000 acres, plus 1.6 million acres of "roadless forest." The term needs to be in quotes, because there are more than 800 miles of roads in the "roadless forest" areas (many of those roads existed when the rule took effect in 2001). Off-road drivers are even getting into the wilderness-study areas -- that's why they're reluctant to compromise. At the same time, some ardent wilderness advocates think the partnership should've included more of those areas in the wilderness wish-list (more than a million acres were left out).

The King Kong of wilderness politics -- The Wilderness Society -- was also not in the core group of negotiators. That national group was reluctant to support some of the terms. So Anderson and some of his environmentalist partners traveled to Washington, D.C., and talked with that group's president, Bill Meadows. Meadows also came to Montana twice and talked with Anderson. Sen. Tester reportedly helped work out a compromise: He not only tuned the Beaverhead-Deerlodge proposal to be somewhat more appealing to The Wilderness Society, he also bundled the proposal with two smaller, similar Montana collaborative efforts, one of which The Wilderness Society had helped put together. That persuaded The Wilderness Society to support the package, insiders say.

Even some Montana Wilderness Association members don't like the deal. George Wuerthner, a longtime MWA member who served on the board in the 1980s, has hiked, hunted and fished in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge forest for more than 35 years. He believes that the partners "have the best intentions," but says that the proposed logging doesn't fit the forest's ecology. He and the other environmentalist critics cite science: Research shows that beetle-killed trees have great value in the ecosystem, providing habitat for many creatures from birds down to ants. Big stand-replacing fires are natural in lodgepole pines (the predominant tree in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge). So, they say, thinning makes no sense at all. They also think there is no such thing as benign logging and believe that the environmental movement should not be embracing the timber industry now.

"If (Montana Wilderness Association's leaders) would enter into this agreement saying, 'We're advocating for wilderness, the timber industry is advocating for logging, we don't think logging is all that great, we

don't think temporary roads are the same as no roads, we just want wilderness,' I could almost accept it," says Wuerthner, who has a master's degree in science communications and has written 35 books. "It sends the wrong message."

But some scientists say there's a new reason to thin the lodgepole pines -- to reduce the risk of catastrophic fires that would shock the ailing ecosystem and worsen climate change. The Beaverhead-Deerlodge partners cite many reasons for dramatic action, including the off-road traffic that increasingly penetrates "roadless forest." As that problem worsens, it makes achieving future wilderness designations even more difficult.

The partners also say they know how to make a temporary road and then remove most or all of its impacts -- and that timber bosses like Anderson can be trusted to do it. "That's a tremendous breakthrough. The notion that we can enter a stand and do some treatment and then back out is an extraordinarily positive step for wildlife," says France of the National Wildlife Federation, who's an active hunter and angler and served on the High Country News board during the 1990s. "This legislation really does good things for wildlife, both for restoring landscapes and setting important precedents." He's particularly pleased with the limits on roads -- even existing road mileage will be reduced to less than 1.5 miles per square mile in "restored" areas -- as well as the large-scale environmental analysis and large stewardship contracts.

Anderson describes how he's learned to remove roads by re-contouring, reseeding and then leaving slash (logging remnants) to block ATV traffic. He says his logging crews would do a mix of "selective cuts, patch cuts, clear-cuts, salvage of blowdown or fire or beetle-kill." Patch cuts leave greener trees, he says, and there will be plenty of "snags" -- dead trees -- left standing for wildlife because so many trees are dead or dying. And he has a powerful argument on his side: "If we go away -- if this industry, our machines and our expertise, is gone -- nothing will be done in the forest. The Forest Service has no money or staff to do it."

What about the federal economic stimulus money -- hundreds of millions of dollars -- that Obama and Congress are injecting into the forests for roadwork and other restoration? It will barely scratch the surface of what needs to be done around the West, the partners say. Besides, they don't trust the Forest Service to spend that money wisely. Trout Unlimited's Farling, who worked for the Forest Service for most of the 1980s as a seasonal firefighter and wilderness ranger (he was also an HCN intern back then), says: "There's no more inefficient way to spend money than to give it to the Forest Service."

The partnership wants to build a platform for long-term funding of restoration through stewardship contracts -- a 10-year-old Forest Service program whose full potential has not been tapped yet.

The Forest Service will probably be the biggest obstacle. The agency's leaders express support for collaborative efforts, but that support is tested whenever collaborators try to override them. The agency is already resisting some terms of a separate 35,000-acre stewardship project that the Beaverhead-Deerlodge partners are trying to put together in the forest's "Eastside" area: The partners want 10,000 acres of logging or thinning there, and the Forest Service wants only 3,000 acres or so.

The partnership's main agreement contradicts the Forest Service's new plan for the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. The "final" plan, which came out four months ago, calls for less logging and about 200,000 fewer acres in new wilderness areas, and has no requirement for 50,000-acre environmental analyses. It seems, in fact, like the epitome of "analysis paralysis" -- seven years were invested in the "final" version, and now it's been hit with nearly 60 appeals, mostly filed by off-road drivers. The Forest Service will probably take several more years to handle those appeals and come up with a final "final" version.

Tom Tidwell, who was only named chief on June 17, spoke with me a few weeks earlier, when he was still regional forester in Missoula. "These collaborative efforts are the best way to reach agreement on many issues," he said. But he went on to say he's concerned that the Beaverhead-Deerlodge deal hasn't been

accepted by all the interest groups (as if that would ever be possible). And he wants to keep using established Forest Service planning and processes to accomplish goals. "We have laws and regulations in place to provide us with direction to develop forest plans and revisions," Tidwell says.

That indicates that the Forest Service will resist the partnership's guarantee of timber to the industry, and possibly other terms of the agreement. A staffer on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge puts it bluntly: The partnership, the staffer says, "is ugly for us."

Other attempts to override the Forest Service have struggled. More than 10 years ago, the Quincy Library Group, a pioneer collaborative effort focused on 2.4 million acres of national forests in northeast California, made a pact calling for more active forest management. In 1998, it even pushed a law through Congress. But the Quincy Group has gotten only portions of what it hoped for; it's still arguing with the Forest Service and entangled in lawsuits from dissenting environmentalists.

But the Beaverhead-Deerlodge partners hope to prevail over the Forest Service. There's a greater sense of crisis now, they say, and more interest in finding answers to important questions: Can lodgepole pines be thinned for restoration? Can temporary roads be rehabbed adequately? Can the Forest Service be kicked into gear like this?

The underlying question remains: Whether or not this particular partnership succeeds, just how much experimenting will be allowed in national forests?

There's a strong current in the environmental movement calling for more experiments. It includes the Three Rivers Challenge, which is part of Sen. Tester's legislative package. In that deal, environmentalists in northwest Montana followed the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership's model: They agree to guarantee the timber industry access to 3,000 acres per year in the Kootenai National Forest in exchange for 30,000 acres of new wilderness.

The industry is also seeking timber guarantees in Idaho's Clearwater Basin Collaborative, where it's negotiating with environmental groups that want wilderness designations in several national forests. The biggest experiment (in acres) is emerging in Arizona, where there's broad consensus that the Forest Service should gear up to do rapid restoration on a million acres of ponderosa pines in four national forests.

These kinds of experiments worry Martin Nie, a professor of natural resources policy at the University of Montana. In a recent study he wrote with graduate student Michael Fiebig, he says that the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership is part of a pernicious trend -- "place-based legislation" contradicting the traditional "umbrella legislation covering all national forests." If the "piecemeal approach" catches on, Nie says, it would increase the chaos in the national forest system. Not only would it trigger more lawsuits, it's unlikely to meet its timber-production goals or even to be adequately funded, in his view. But most of all, he worries that it could set a "dangerous precedent" by encouraging similar experiments in other forests. It's "the wrong tool for the right job," he says.

Nie wants Congress to pass a law that applies to all forests, setting limits and creating a standard framework "to begin a more deliberate and organized period of experimentation." Bob Ekey, head of The Wilderness Society's Northern Rockies office in Bozeman, Mont., also wants Congress to pass such a law.

"There's good energy in all these collaboratives popping up all over. And everybody is writing their own rules as they move forward," Ekey says. "We need some structure, some sideboards (and) policy pieces (from Congress). I'm not sure what that looks like. It would be great if Congress started holding hearings" to gather testimony about what's right and wrong with proposals like the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Partnership, he says. "We need to define restoration (and) to define collaboration."

When they ask for rules to govern thinking outside the box, however, people like Ekey and Nie sound like the Forest Service. They just want to create a larger box.

Sherm Anderson is a super motorhead. His logging fleet alone includes five feller-bunchers that roll on tracks while cutting trees, about 15 skidders and nine delimiting machines, plus a lot of big trucks. He has about a dozen personal snowmobiles, ATVs and Harley Davidson motorcycles. And he collects classic cars -- more than 60 of them, including a 1913 electric model. So when he says that the motorized recreation folks are getting enough terrain in the partnership deal, it has some impact, undermining the complaints of the hard-liners who want to drive everywhere in the forest.

Anderson is also a leader in the Mormon Church and the Republican Party, and served in the Montana Legislature in the early 2000s. He's on the board of directors for both a local museum and a local bank, and he's branched out into real estate, a construction business and a fitness center (a breakeven at best, but good for the town and his employees). He points to his ranch: 1,200 deeded acres on a bench above the town.

With dynamics like that, the Beaverhead-Deerlodge partners say they're changing Montana's whole political balance: Even if their agreement doesn't become law, they're laying a foundation for future deals on wilderness and other controversial issues. "This effort has brought us together in ways we never imagined," says Montana Wilderness Association's Baker. "The thing we give to them (the timber folks) that matters the most is ourselves -- our commitment that we will make these projects work. Everyone in the partnership has come to understand the importance of that." The science of lodgepole pine ecosystems -- logged versus unlogged -- is less solid than the relationships they've built.

Anderson drives me around Deer Lodge -- mostly dilapidated buildings whose businesses barely hang on. The only enterprise that seems to be thriving is the state prison. He points out some of his efforts to improve his community -- the fire station he built for a bargain price and a small decent-looking new subdivision. The main attraction is the museum, a wacky combo of the old territorial prison and more than a hundred classic cars, many of them on loan from Anderson.

At Sun Mountain Lumber, Anderson says he thinks that the housing market will rebound soon, which means he'll need more timber. He shows me how his skidders run on tracks instead of tires, with the drive gears above the tracks, "so the whole track floats on the ground, for less soil compaction." Even so, as the critics say, even the most careful logging has impacts. His environmentalist partners simply trust him to do his best.

Inside the mills, where wood and steel collide, it's incredibly noisy (which explains why Anderson has hearing aids in both ears). Raw logs slam into the sawmill and shriek through the blades, coming out as rough 2-by-4s that whine through the planer mill. Computerized scanners maximize the amount of lumber available from smaller trees. Men and women covered in sawdust move as quickly as the conveyor belts, operating controls and sorting the flow, diverting any flawed boards for more processing.

Most of the studs are loaded on rail cars and shipped out of state, to be made into buildings for people who have no idea of the work involved. The 2-by-4s that are not good enough to make an 8-foot-long stud (the standard minimum) rumble into the finger-joint mill for remaking. Anderson shows me how that works: The finger-joint machines cut good pieces from the flawed studs, make wedge-shaped cuts in the end of each piece, and then glue the pieces together to make studs at least 8 feet long. He grabs a finger-jointed stud and shows me. "It's stronger and straighter than a regular stud," he says, "because of the glue and you're alternating your grains of wood." The pieces fit together like a handshake.

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