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Timber Thieves Strike at Heart of Lands Held Dear

By [SUSAN SAULNY](#)

ROYALTON, Vt. — The trees around George and Agnes Spaulding's 170-year-old farmhouse here are as good as money in the bank, many being old-growth maples that are valuable not only for the quality of their wood but also for the sweet sap that the couple boils into syrup each spring.

Having been born on the farm, Mr. Spaulding, 78, loves the trees the way only someone who grew up with them could. But beyond that, he counts on the syrup sales to supplement the family income, which comes mainly from the twice-a-day milking of three dozen cows.

So when a neighboring farmer crossed onto the Spauldings' land and chopped down 30 or so of their best trees, the couple was devastated.

"There were a lot of nights spent worrying, and when I'd get up, I'd just see bare stumps," said Mr. Spaulding, who was awarded about \$30,000 for the tree loss in a civil lawsuit against his neighbor last month. "The wood was sold for lumber. And he didn't leave much very good."

Across the country, trees are disappearing in cases that are often small in scale but largely unsettling, probably prompted by the rise in timber value and the increase in worldwide demand for American hardwood — particularly from builders in Europe and China. The total value of the American log export market has more than doubled since 2000, industry experts said, and it continues to grow.

In the United States, forests are not being illegally logged on a systemic scale, as is the case in countries like Indonesia, Malawi and Brazil, where unauthorized harvesting has led to serious deforestation and attendant environmental problems. Here, the issue is often scattered and intimate, and often affects homeowners, parks and public forests.

In Flint, Mich., for instance, thieves last month stole black walnut trees from the grassy landscaped edge of a main city street. Earlier last year, people were snatching saplings from a city park there as soon as they were planted.

"It's a different scale and victim," said Paul Harwood, who owns a forest management and wildlife consulting business in central Vermont, contrasting the domestic problem to the larger international issue. "But it's still a loss that goes well beyond the value of the trees."

In Arkansas, predators want pine; tree rustlers hit a small section of a state forest sometime in the last few weeks, an investigator said, leaving only stumps. In Kentucky, thieves hunt with muffled chain saws for oak, chestnut and cherry trees. And as the Spauldings learned, maple trees are tall targets of the Northeast.

"It's getting so much worse that I'd say in every county in Kentucky we have timber theft issues," said Dea Riley, executive director

of the Appalachian Roundtable, which provides resources and legal help to victims of tree rustlers. “So many more people are showing up to say, ‘Hey, my timber got stolen.’ The phone just hasn’t stopped ringing. We have a waiting list of victims that we won’t get to in a year.”

Ms. Riley continued, “Most of these people don’t have the money to fight for themselves when they are victimized. And many of these cases are huge losses to the landowner.”

Data on timber theft is hard to come by because, experts say, much of it goes unreported, and many states lump it with other crimes under general property theft handled at the local level. Advocates in some states, like Ms. Riley and others in Kentucky, are trying to stiffen penalties.

“Our cause is really a socioeconomic one,” Ms. Riley said. “People are being abused.”

Alberto Goetzl, a forest economist who is studying the extent of domestic illegal logging for a coming report, said that without data, it was hard to prove that tree thieves were more active now than in the past. He said the issue was probably cyclical, depending on pricing, and more of a local nuisance than anything.

“Some people say it’s worse out in the Pacific Northwest, others say Appalachia,” Mr. Goetzl said. “We have not been able to determine whether it’s any worse in one place or another. What we have learned is that the concern about timber theft is greater than I thought before I went into this.”

The price paid to loggers for timber varies from mill to mill, region to region, and is largely dependent on the quality and size of individual trees, and the global and domestic markets. Demand for softwoods of the Pacific Northwest like the Douglas fir, largely used in construction to frame houses, is in a slump right now because of the downturn in domestic housing starts. But the hardwoods — used for things like high-end finishes and furniture — are more coveted now than in recent years, particularly abroad. One top-quality black walnut tree in the Midwest, for instance, could be worth over \$5,000.

Black walnut trees so often disappear from their owners that Keith Argow, the president of the National Woodland Owners Association, said, “Walnut has feet,” because the trees seem to “just walk away.”

Mr. Argow continued, “We have found more and more landowners are patrolling their properties more carefully as a trend nationwide.”

Timber thieves tend to pick the easiest trees to steal, and they most often belong to vulnerable owners, like older people or the poor — or people who are on vacation or away from their land. Mr. Spaulding had been in the hospital for heart surgery when his trees were chopped.

“A lot of people grow timber for a specific purpose; it’s retirement, or a college education,” said Dennis Mason, an investigator for the Arkansas Forestry Commission. “Thirty or 40 good trees can be worth many thousands of dollars. But it’s so easy to steal, and most people get away with it. I’d venture to say we only get 20 percent, at the most.”

Still, since 2002, investigators in Arkansas have recovered more than \$1.4 million for landowners in about 340 timber theft cases, Mr. Mason said.

In Conneaut, Ohio, in the far northeastern corner of the state, Frederick T. Bennett, 60, is missing several black walnut and butternut trees that, he said, were about as old as he is and were planted by his father.

Mr. Bennett recalled watering them as a child, using three-gallon pails because he was too small to lift five-gallon containers. Before his father died, Mr. Bennett said, he made him promise not to cut those trees down.

But last June, someone else did, bulldozing the trees and claiming they were outside of Mr. Bennett's property.

"I was sickened," Mr. Bennett said, choking up at the thought of his father seeing the stumps.

The authorities would not prosecute because they could not prove intent to steal the trees, he said, and now the case is in civil court. The timber was valued at \$10,000, Mr. Bennett said, but the trees were irreplaceable to his family.

"There have been four generations of Bennetts that picnicked under those trees and partied," he said, "and now they're gone."

Catrin Einhorn contributed reporting.

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