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**Geography of New York State**

**Forest Cover and Uses**

The forests of New York State are relatively young. They have been around since the retreat of the continental glaciers 10,000 years ago. As the region warmed, seeds brought in by wind, birds and animals, took hold. Every vegetation species has unique needs of temperature, moisture and sunlight. The grasses came first; they were followed by shrubs and bushes, then trees. The tree species competed for sunlight. Taller trees replaced the shorter ones, creating a forest canopy. Throughout the post-glacial period, as the planet experienced times of global warming and global cooling, the forest cover changed. Tree species thrived until conditions changed and they were replaced by another species of tree. The present day forest is a result of many factors including terrain, climate conditions, soil, human disturbance and state law.

Prior to the arrival of the Europeans, it is estimated that forests covered over 90% of New York -- virtually the entire state except those areas that could not support tree growth. In general, the region's cool-to-warm moist climate encouraged tree growth, but not at the rate of the forests found in warmer climates. The Native Americans had an impact on the forest. By cutting down trees and burning clearings for agriculture and villages, they allowed sunlight to penetrate to the forest floor, starting a new vegetation sequence and allowing the seeds of non-dominant plants to take hold, thus diversifying the forest cover.

At the end of the American Revolution when settlers flocked to New York for the newly available Indian lands, it is estimated that 80% of the state was forested. By the 1830s, only 50% of the state had a forest cover. Agricultural settlement, urbanization, and industrialization all combined to decrease the forest cover as land was cleared for crops and trees were cut down to be used as a fuel or in the construction of buildings and railroad rights-of-way. The rate of deforestation increased rapidly following the Civil War as clear-cut logging techniques became popular and the American industrial revolution began. In the 1880s, it was estimated that as little as 20% of state remained forested. Concerned by the rate of deforestation, legislators in Albany fearing a desolate treeless landscape that was being ravaged by fire and erosion added the "forever wild" article to the Constitution of the State of New York in 1885. This addition to the state's constitution protected the remaining pristine tracts of forest in the Adirondacks and the Catskills as forest preserves. Later, other land was set aside as state forests and state parks. By the 1960s, the forest cover had risen back to 50% and today 62% of the state is forested.

This dramatic turn-around is a result of many factors, including:

- (1) a state-sponsored effort to preserve existing forests and enlarge the state's holdings through purchase and exchange;
- (2) active reforestation and land reclamation programs;
- (3) a decrease in acreage used for agriculture, allowing marginal land to be naturally reforested; and

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(4) an effort within urban and suburban areas to increase the acreage of trees within their borders.

## **FOREST USES**

The forests of NYS are used commercially in the following ways;

1. Commercial Lumbering
  - a) saw milling (logs, planks, boards)
  - b) paper and pulp
  - c) furniture
  - d) flooring
  - e) construction materials
2. Christmas Tree Plantations
  - a) located mainly in western NYS
  - b) trees are harvested after 6-20 years
  - c) constant recycling of acreage and planting of saplings
3. Fence Posts and Telephone Poles
  - a) use tall, small diameter trees
  - b) wood is chemically treated to prevent rot and control insects
4. Maple Syrup Production
  - a) NYS ranks within the top three states in annual production
  - b) Major producing areas are the colder, snowier regions
5. Firewood, Chips and Sawdust
  - a) used as fuels
  - b) used in landscaping

The forests are also used for recreation and environmental preservation:

- a) state and county parks
- b) wildlife management
- c) watershed protection
- d) erosion and flood control
- e) wind breaks
- f) noise control
- g) private estates