The Making of a Forest Activist
By Ruth Stroud

Susan Robinson has engaged in some tough battles in her 63 years, but the one against California’s timber industry and its efforts to clearcut more than a million and a half of forested land is probably the toughest yet—and she needs the public to step up to the fight.

“Californians have been duped because they think that certainly in California our forests are being adequately protected,” said Robinson, who is deeply engaged in the anti-clearcutting fight. The truth is that the laws governing forest management are so loosely written, “you can drive a logging truck through the loopholes,” she said.

The problem is that industrial timber companies, such as Sierra Pacific Industries (SPI), have enormous influence on Board of Forestry and Fire Protection, CalFire, and California lawmakers, who regulate and oversee them, Robinson said. “The timber industry has deep pockets to sue and influence on state agencies and the governor.” This is a David and Goliath battle.

What can people do about this? To begin with, they need to educate themselves about the issues by going to the Stop Clearcutting California webpage (http://www.stopclearcuttingca.org/) and the Sierra Club Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/StopClearcuttingCA/). Then they need to start calling their state legislators to let them know that state forestry laws are weak, and our natural resources aren’t being protected. People must pass this message onto their friends and also post on Facebook. We need to build a movement to stop this practice.

Environmentalism in her DNA

Robinson comes by her activism on behalf of the natural world almost as a birthright. Born in a small town in central Pennsylvania, Robinson grew up living and playing in the state’s parks and forests. Her father, the state’s regional forester and park manager, taught her to understand, love and care about the beautiful wooded land that surrounded her.

“I grew up knowing a lot about animals and the web of life and how it interconnects,” she said.

After getting a degree in health planning and hospital administration from Penn State, Robinson went on to get a masters in worker safety and environmental studies from the University of Arizona. She then moved to the West Coast to work for a large energy company for 25 years in a variety of jobs, some but not all having an environmental component.
After retiring, Robinson and her husband left the Bay Area to live full-time in Arnold, California. Situated about 4,000 feet up in the Stanislaus National Forest in the Sierra, the town is about 5 miles from Calaveras Big Trees State Park, famous for its giant sequoias. When driving the backroads, she came upon fresh clearcut after clearcut and she became shocked and outraged.

Free to take up a cause that was close to her heart, Robinson joined the anti-clearcutting battle. Her background in science and forestry and her analytic and strategic skills make her a natural for this work to which she devotes many hours a week. In addition to being on the board of Ebbetts Pass Forest Watch and working with the Sierra Club and the Stop Clearcutting California campaign, she collaborates with other forestry advocate groups. She and these groups are working tirelessly on your behalf to protect and restore healthy forests and watersheds by promoting responsible forest management and logging—and fighting clearcutting.

Clearcutting had been a growing environmental threat in the Sierra Nevada since about 1996 and became a flashpoint for public protests starting around 2000, when SPI, the state’s largest landowner with 1.7 million acres, began clearcutting huge swaths of its forested lands, with the ultimate aim of converting 1.2 million acres into tree plantations.

Bulldozing biodiverse forests and replacing them with tree plantations—usually ponderosa pine—is akin to planting corn fields. Robinson said, "everything is the same age and height, which increases fire risk." This aggressive logging practice disrupts nature’s natural cycles, which purify water, store carbon and provide wildlife habitat. “Additionally, there’s a whole web of life under the soil that is rich in carbon and life—all of that gets destroyed by clearcutting,” Robinson said.

Talking from her home in a still biodiverse forest, Robinson can hear the sounds of nature surrounding her.

“I can’t even tell you how many birds there are here.”

“But this is not the case after timber companies clearcut an area and convert it into a sterile tree plantation,” she said.

“You don’t hear or see many birds. There’s nothing there for them. That habitat is devastated. That’s what sucks my soul,” she said. “To have grown up and been in the forest a lot of my life and to know if you go quietly in the forest, you will see a variety of plants and wildlife. There is much less life in a clearcut or a tree plantation.”

Robinson does get discouraged sometimes, she admitted, but quitting such an important cause isn’t in her DNA.
“I’m like a bulldog. I want to keep shaking it. In the end, I’m hopeful that science will win. Or, if science doesn’t win, then nature will win. These tree plantations will not be sustainable in climate change scenarios. In the end, Sierra Pacific and the other timber companies will have to change because their business model won’t work.”

*Ruth Stroud is a writer, teacher and member of the Stop Clearcutting CA Campaign.*