

Preface

The hurricane that pummeled the East Coast on September 21, 1938, was New England's most damaging weather event ever. Call it New England's Katrina and you might be understating its power. The storm plowed into Long Island and New England without warning, killing hundreds of people and destroying roads, bridges, dams, and buildings. The devastation to the region's infrastructure required repairs costing \$300 million in Depression-era dollars, approximately \$5 billion today.

Almost every word that has been written about the 1938 hurricane recounts the damage to the built environment and to the people who lived in it. It has been an urban story rather than a rural one, a tale of the coast rather than the inland forest. That's understandable. Compared with the loss of human life and the destruction of property, damage to trees might seem like a scratch on the fender of a car that's been totaled. Still, our lives depend—either directly or indirectly—on forests, and the destruction of a thousand square miles of forestland remains a story that needs to be told.

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Forest ecologists have long seen Thirty-Eight as a touchstone event and have studied its long-lasting impacts across the region, but their impressive work on the role of huge disturbances like this has not reached the layman. Little has been written for public consumption about what happened to the forests of New England, and some of it has been so casually reported that it's grossly inaccurate. In a book titled *Hurricane!*, Joe McCarthy (no, not that Joe McCarthy) notes that New Hampshire lost half of its white pines, which is a reasonable statement. But McCarthy follows that with this whopper: "Most of the timber felled by the hurricane was too splintered to be used, except as firewood or as pulp at a paper mill." In fact, the hurricane recovery effort awakened a moribund wood-products industry from the Depression. The administrators of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal were accustomed to big challenges and had shown no timidity in putting the full force of the government into play, so the U.S. Forest Service jumped in and created a new agency to respond to the emergency. It expedited the salvage of billions of board feet of logs, but it had another reason to rid the area of the limbs, branches, and boles that carpeted New England. Forest Service officials feared a wildfire that, once ignited, could spread throughout the region, killing more people and destroying more infrastructure. The scale of the timber salvage and fire hazard reduction meant that the region's worst hurricane was followed by the largest logging job the country has ever seen.

In *Thirty-Eight* I tell the story of this unprecedented one-two punch through a number of lenses: forest ecology, meteorology, social science, political science, and land management. An event of this magnitude requires a multifaceted narrative because the natural disaster and the human history—before and after—cannot be separated. Ecology and economy have never been wound more tightly together.

The last time a storm of anywhere near this magnitude had hit

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New England was more than a century before, in 1815. So many generations had come and gone since then that the possibility of a hurricane had disappeared from the public consciousness, and newspapers the following day proclaimed it New England's first hurricane. Such an extended period without hurricanes seems inconceivable, given our recent history of extreme weather events. Meteorologists and forest historians tell us that another hurricane of this magnitude could occur at any time. We live in an entirely different world from the one laid low in 1938. In *Thirty-Eight* I examine the ways those differences will influence how destructive the next hurricane will be.

If you have an interest in New England history, forests and trees, or extreme weather events in a changing world, pull up a chair. This is a book about forests and people. We are part of nature. We have changed nature profoundly, but still our forests sustain us economically, ecologically, and spiritually. In *Thirty-Eight*, I tell the story of a remarkable hurricane and show how a combination of natural disturbance and human actions has created the world we live in. More than seventeen million people now live within the area affected by the hurricane. The green landscape that surrounds us might seem like a comfortingly stable backdrop for daily life, but it is a dynamic system changing every day. And every once in a great while, an explosion of change bursts across a wide area in a way that people never forget.

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