

# WORKING TOGETHER: TOURISM, FIRST NATIONS AND FORESTRY

By Brenda Martin

At the mouth of Orford River, the brilliant hue of glacier-fed, turquoise coloured fresh water contrasts with darker sea water of Bute Inlet. But the mixing of the fresh and salt waters are not the only contrasting thing at Orford these days. There is also an unlikely triad working together—forestry, First Nations and tourism.

Now, First Nations working in forestry is not unusual these days. And neither is First Nations working in tourism. But forestry and tourism are still unfamiliar partners. That said there's a new age dawning in Campbell River and indeed along the coast between BC's two most famous industries.

Back in 2011, the Homalco First Nation, led by then Chief Richard Harry, was in the process of treaty negotiations

and was looking to the future. With tenure negotiations underway, they decided it was a good time to start a forestry program and bought a logging company, now called Homalco Forestry LP, based out of Campbell River.

Today Homalco Forestry, a TLA member company, has 20-25 employees and is in its fourth year of harvesting 175,000 m<sup>3</sup> per year on Interfor and TimberWest tenure. Originally, the Homalco planned to harvest on their own tenure but treaty negotiations have been slower than planned. "We hadn't intended to compete with other logging contractors in the Campbell River area but we have managed to stay afloat without having our own Homalco tenure," said Gordie Atkinson, General Manager for Homalco Forestry. In the long term,

Atkinson says, "We'd like to manage a fair share of the Homalco traditional territory and also harvest timber for Interfor and TimberWest."

One of the few 100 per cent band-owned companies, Homalco Forestry is also working hard to build up its First Nations workforce. Derek Ferguson, Woods Foreman for Homalco Forestry and Metis himself, is proud to say that 50 per cent of the workforce is First Nations. "I usually mentor people I think have promise and then get them to shadow another First Nations or Metis employee," said Ferguson. "I believe it's part of my job to build capacity within the Homalco First Nation."

"From my point of view it is happening very fast," said Atkinson. "I never would have thought we'd have half First



Nations employment in four years.” And he acknowledges that logging is hard work. “It’s not for everybody. Camp life can be isolating and the days are long—up at 4 am and not back until 6 pm.”

Another business arm of the Homalco First Nation has run grizzly bear tours at Orford for 20 odd years. Every year the bears come down to the river estuary to feed on the salmon returning to spawn. While they are focused on filling their bellies with salmon, it’s easy to watch the bears in their natural element from one of the Homalco’s four bear viewing towers.

In 2008 Homalco Wildlife Tours Inc. reorganized the business and trimmed overhead costs. “We used the 80/20 rule,” said Shawn O’Connor, Economic Development Officer and General Manager of Orford River Operations. “80 per cent of the business was coming from 20 per cent of the customers so we focused on them.” They also focused on infrastructure—building a presentation centre and two more bear viewing towers—and the professional development of their guides. The business continued to grow.

Then, in the summer of 2014, the inevitable happened. The two Homalco businesses overlapped. Homalco Forestry would be harvesting in Orford while Homalco Wildlife Tours ran their bear tours.

Were people worried?

“Logging and tourism? I embraced it,” said Atkinson. “We like to show off our natural resource planning.”

The Homalco already attend tourism/forestry meetings hosted by the provincial government in Campbell River. “The kayakers and the fishing tour people attend as well,” said Atkinson. “These are the other people who use the Discovery Islands and Bute Inlet for their businesses.” The group has worked hard to work together rather than get bogged down in their own needs. “It’s easy to get single-minded about managing for your own resource—be it tourism, fishing or forestry. I think that’s where the Homalco can offer a fresh perspective. They manage many resources—hydro, forestry, wilderness tours and a fish hatchery and this gives us a broader perspective.”

O’Connor also explains that an action plan was created to help things go smoothly. “We developed a protocol for driving on the roads—logging trucks

would hang up at the 6 km mark so tour buses could get up the road and the turn at 5.5 km.” They also bought another vehicle so they could shuttle tourists away to a safe viewing point when the log dump was in use.

But the key was talking to the tour providers and guides and making sure they knew about the sustainable forestry practices being used. Tour guides also informed tourists that while new cutblocks can be unappealing, they’d point out one year, two year and five-year-old cutblocks on the way up to Orford so tourists would know that it is just a matter of time before a cutblock greens up. “The key is to de-emphasize and explain,” said O’Connor. “We didn’t have one complaint. In fact, some tourists thought it was cool.”

“There was discussion with the tourists at Orford River,” said Atkinson. The displays at the new presentation centre explained the Homalco’s sustainable resource development and got the conversation started. “Most of the tourists are interested in how we manage our resources—especially the Europeans,” said Atkinson. “They ask how we replant and what the size of the cutblocks are—the whole bundle. Europeans have been having these conversations for a long time.”

“Forestry at the end of the day is about relationships,” said Rhiannon Poupard, Manager of First Nations & Forestry

Partnerships with Interfor. There are a lot of people involved in the Orford forestry operation. Interfor has the tenure and does the planning. They’ve signed a memorandum of understanding with Homalco First Nation because the tenure is within the Homalco’s traditional territory. Ponting Logging & Grade, another TLA member, is the road building contractor and Homalco Forestry is harvesting the trees. “Success on the ground means good relationships with all parties,” said Poupard.

Mark Ponting agrees. “Over the last 11 years, we’ve built most of the road in this area. We value the good working relationship we have with the Homalco First Nations, Homalco Forestry and Interfor.” And further demonstrating the cross-over of the two, once juxtaposed industries, Ponting is also part owner of Coastal Water Taxi & Transport—a company that brings tourists up to Orford for bear tours. So he’s a stakeholder in both industries.

Looking at it from a wholistic angle, Shawn O’Connor is even more pragmatic. “The bottom line was there were a lot of bears in 2014 because three sets of triplets were born at Orford that spring.” In other words, when the estuary is swarming with bears contentedly eating salmon, tourists are less likely to assume logging is negatively affecting wildlife.

“A few years earlier there were no cubs,” said O’Connor. “That year there



Drew Blaney is one of the Homalco youth cultural tour guides. His grandpa was born at Orford 79 years ago when the Homalco still had a village there.

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was a very small amount of logging going on compared to last year but people blamed the logging for the lack of bears. I tracked the days of the logging and the days the bears were in the estuary and there was no correlation.” The problem was there were very few fish in the river that year and there are other foods for bears to eat in the forests. “They only come down to the river for the fish,” said O’Connor. “No fish, no bears.”

Sonora Resort, located on Sonora Island not far from Orford River, is rated by Forbes as one of the ten top, upscale, all-inclusive resorts. It offers guests a five star experience in an area surrounded by young second growth forests and wildlife. “For the most part, we don’t get a lot of comment about the logging,” said Sean Ross, General Manager of Sonora Resort. “That’s one of the good things about working hand-in-hand with the forest companies. That desire to work toward that goal of taking trees out while still maintaining those great visual viewpoints for the guests.”

Ross understands that both tourism and harvesting trees are big players in BC’s provincial economy. “Forestry feeds a lot of families. I think when forest companies and tourism companies have open and honest dialogue with each other—they’re completely transparent—great things can be done.”

And great things continue to happen at Orford. This year Homalco Wildlife Tours Inc. offered cultural tours in June, July and early August. While cultural tours were offered to extend the tour season—bears are only in the estuary from mid-August to late October—the mission statement was to “turn culture into cool in the eyes of the Homalco youth,” said O’Connor. “It’s been a wonderful thing and a big success.”

The new Chief, Mary-Ann Enevoldsen has worked hard to bring back Homalco Culture to all band members. A call was made for Homalco youth who had completed grade 12. The selected youth completed a two week cultural boot camp where they learned about cedar bark weaving and stripping, traditional dances and the Homalco language. “The group also went to Haida Gwaii to meet the Chief and Elders there and to see how the Haida are doing cultural tourism,” explained O’Connor.

A cultural tour includes a traditional greeting from the Homalco youth tour

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Photo: TLA Staff

Cheyanne Hackett, also a Homalco youth cultural tour guide, wears a button blanket made for her by her grandma when she was five years old. Her grandma has since passed away but Cheyanne believes her grandma knew she would need it.

guides and a chance to paddle a traditional canoe across the estuary to see pictographs made by the Homalco who lived at Orford thousands of years ago. Everyone also gets to weave their own cedar bracelet and take a turn in the wildlife viewing towers to see early bears and the other wildlife that lives in the estuary. The tour ends with a salmon and crab feast and traditional dances performed by the guides.

There's much happening in Orford

these days—all of it good. The forest resource and tourism industries are operating in conjunction with one another, in plain view. Mark Ponting confirms that this forestry/tourism partnership is long term. "This year we're building road and harvesting near South Gate at the top of Bute Inlet. But we'll be back at Orford next spring." And so will the bears, the tourists and the Homalco youth.🌲