

FIRST NATIONS & FORESTRY: WORKING IN INDUSTRY TODAY

By Ian MacNeill

Over the past 30 years Gerry Merkel has put a lot of effort into encouraging young Canadians from First Nations to look to the woods as a career option—it's good for the land and it's good for the people. "I believe the standard and care of the land has improved significantly now that so many Aboriginals are involved in the process," says Merkel, president and CEO of the Tahltan Nation Development Corporation and one of Canada's first aboriginal registered forest professionals.

Today, an increasing number of young people from First Nations are finding that working in the forest not only provides them with good incomes, but reconnects them with their cultural heritage and values. For thousands of years the forest was not only home to Canada's Aboriginal peoples, but a hunting ground and place of immense spiritual

and ceremonial value. Its importance in sustaining communities helped develop an approach to land use that was thousands of years ahead of its time. As an editorial about the values Canada's Aboriginal people bring to forestry in the online publication *Cultural Survival* put it, "practices emanating from this belief embody respect for the elders and embrace freedom of choice and strong relationships within the family and community." Aboriginals who work in the forest today, whether it be as loggers, foresters or policy makers, are bringing this ancient cultural land-use ethic to work with them every day and making a difference—a difference their communities are recognizing and acknowledging. "It is really great when the elders look at you and say 'good work,'" says Merkel.

In this issue of *Truck LoggerBC* we would like to acknowledge a few of them

as well. They represent a cross-section of ages and occupations, but all are part of the future of Aboriginal forestry in British Columbia, and they hope others will join them as well.

Julius Leo, 21, Lil'Wat First Nation, Mt. Currie

Julius Leo wanted to be a welder but fate intervened when the welding course was full. Instead he attended a 15-day basic logging skills boot camp run by the College of the Rockies. "I always liked the idea of working outdoors and that's what logging is all about," says Leo, a member of the Lil'Wat Nation in the Mt. Currie area.

It was hard at first, he admits, but like most things it got easier as time went by and he honed his skills. Upon graduating from the course he immediately got a job with Lil'Wat Forestry



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Ventures. “I love it,” he says. “I love working outside, getting to know what’s around me in the environment, learning to read and understand it, all the people I meet. It keeps me in shape and I get to stand on the top of mountains and look across the world.” A couple of other bonuses include “getting away from technology” and “better pay than a fast-food restaurant!”

He says he has no idea where the business will take him in the long run, but intends to stick with it—opportunities are already on the horizon. He’s scheduled to take an assistant silviculture supervisor course this year which will teach him about surveying and give him a better understanding of the land and how it’s used.

If anything, he says, he’d like to have some more company in the woods and says he’s always trying to convince oth-

ers to take the course. “There are lots of opportunities to work, here and other places,” he says.

**Marina Rayner, 33,
Huu-ay-aht First Nation, Parksville**

Taking up a career in forestry didn’t just allow Marina Rayner, 33, of Parksville to achieve her goals of getting out from behind the desk and working with nature, it allowed her to reconnect with her people, the Huu-ay-aht First Nation.

“I grew up in places like Parksville, which are the opposite side of the island from our traditional territory at Bamfield,” she explains. “Now I’m working for Meridian Forest Services, a TLA member company, which contracts with HFN Forestry, the forestry arm of the Huu-ay-aht group of businesses. I feel I am more connected to my heritage because I’m more involved in the Nation

and have a higher investment in how the land is treated.”

It almost didn’t happen. Rayner originally attended the University of Vancouver Island in Nanaimo in pursuit of a business degree, but a chance elective changed the course of her life. “I convinced the forestry department to let me take botany and my love of forestry just grew from there,” she says. Her subsequent experiences disproved the notion that forestry is just for men.

“During the summer I worked for both Island Timberlands and Western Forest Products, and in both cases the number of females outnumbered the males,” she reports. “I think more young women are branching out and trying new things, and I can’t think of any job in forestry that women can’t do. I mean I’ve never heard of a woman faller, but that doesn’t mean it hasn’t happened, or



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Photo submitted by Marina Rayner

Marina Rayner and her daughters Sydney (L) and Taylor the day she graduated from Vancouver Island University with her newly minted Forest Resources Technology diploma. The robe is a family heirloom; her grandmother Dolly McRae wore it when she graduated from UBC with a degree in anthropology in 1988, and it is adorned with fireweed from McRae's Gitksan clan near Kitwanga.

that it won't in the future."

One of the perks of her job—her official title is Assistant Forester/HFN Liaison—is that no two days are ever the same. "It really varies," she says. "I could be out doing safety or production inspections; seeing what's going on in the tenure. I'm also taking care of the planting contracts, so I'm also dealing with silviculture surveys nowadays."

She believes there's immense value in more young First Nations men and women following her example. "It's good that First Nations are becoming increasingly involved in what is going on with their lands," she says. "I've also

found that when a First Nation's person gets more educated they talk about going back and helping out their communities. That's how I felt, that was my goal, and that's what I've done."

Andy Clappis, 37, Huu-ay-aht First Nation, Port Alberni

After a decade working for the Huu-ay-aht Nation examining trees and logs for signs of cultural modification by the ancestors, Andy Clappis got sideswiped by the recession in 2008 and started thinking about what to do next. With some encouragement from a band mentor he settled on learning

to operate an excavator and he's never looked back.

Although there's a learning curve when it comes to operating a big machine—and there was plenty of pressure because he learned on the job—eventually you get so comfortable with it all that the machine starts to feel like an extension of your own body. "You have to be able to envision what you're doing, what you want to happen," he says. And what's a typical day like? "Well, I guess I'm doing a major in road maintenance and minor in road building," he says laughing.

It's work he loves, partly because he just plain likes to work, partly because it provides the money he needs to support his young family, but also because he feels there's a future in it. "Through treaty we got tenure and it's a renewable resource so I can see working for years to come and I'm only half way through my working life," he says.

He thinks it's a good idea for First Nations' workers to be working the land, especially when those lands are part of their traditional territories. "Sure the law says you're not supposed to damage streams, but you're not careful because of the law, you're careful because those streams are important to your people."

Tyler Ferguson, 37, Métis, Campbell River

When asked how it is he ended being a logger Tyler Ferguson can only laugh, saying it probably has as much to do with his Métis heritage as his personal family history. "I think it's in the blood," he says. "My great-grandfather was a logger, my grandfather was a logger, and so was my dad, although I don't know if we became loggers because we're native or we're native because we're loggers."

He started early; summers and holidays when he was a boy and full time since the age of 17. "I was bucking on the landing to start and then moved on to running equipment pretty early, things like log loaders and skidders, some Cat work. I guess I've done a little bit of everything."

He's currently working for Homalco Forestry, a TLA member company, in Campbell River. His day starts with a pleasant boat ride from Menzies Bay to Sonora Island. "I like the traveling around part of it," says Ferguson whose working life has almost been split in

half between the Interior where he grew up and the coast where he lives now. "I like all the different things there are to do—working the float camps, barging in equipment—you never get bored."

It's an occupation that suits both his temperament and his inherited strongman physique. "I like the hard work and the pay is decent," he says. "Loggers are good, hard workers and I relate well to people like that. I don't want it easy. Nothing's ever been given to me. I've worked for everything I have and I wouldn't want it any other way."

**Matt Wealick, 41,
Sto:lo First Nation, Chilliwack**

When you're raised on beautiful northeast coast of Vancouver Island it's pretty much a slam dunk that you go into the logging business. "If you grew up in Sayward like I did that's what everybody did," says Matt Wealick, a Sto:lo from the Ts'elxwéyeqw tribe and a member of the Tzeachten band. "I dreamed of being a logger like my dad; it looked like a good career and a good way to make money."

He did three years setting chokers

and learning about the business from the sharp end as it were before enrolling in forestry at the University of British Columbia. Today he's a registered professional forester, currently working for Probyn Log, a TLA member company, as First Nations Strategic Advisor and sits on the TLA Board of Directors as Chair of the Aboriginal Affairs Committee. "I like it because of the planning aspect," he says. "It's like a big jigsaw puzzle and I get to put the pieces together." He's glad he started out on the logging end though. "I have a good understanding of how what I do affects the guys who actually have to do the work."

He thinks it crucial for First Nations people as a whole to become more engaged in forestry at all levels. Proper forest management is linked to the preservation of First Nations culture, he says. It's important for BC's Aboriginal peoples to understand how government manages resources like forestry and then be a part of the process for finding ways to create a win-win-win situation between government, industry and First Nations. "You can't just throw stones at something you just don't understand.

Once you understand it you may still have to throw stones, but at least you then know the spot you want to hit," he says smiling.

There is not enough space here to list the wide range of jobs currently available in forestry, but they range from logging to road building, first aid to forestry, and a whole host of other things in between. And it's no longer just a man's world; an increasing number of young women like Marina Rayner and others are finding a place for themselves. Resources are available to assist young people in finding the job that's right for them, and obtaining the training that will help them get it. A list of these resources is available on the Truck Logger website at www.tla.ca/training. Logging may not be for everybody, but there's no denying that for those who feel the lure of the woods there really is no life like it—important work, good pay, and a working environment that includes some of the grandest scenery the world has to offer.▲

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