

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES FOR FORESTRY EDUCATION

By Adrienne Tanner

About eight years ago, Virginia Dean, then a schoolteacher in Delta who often traipsed through the woods with her outdoorsy mother, signed up for a different type of forest excursion. She joined a group of about 20 BC teachers on a Festival of Forestry tour, an educational field trip for teachers focused on forest management. As a business teacher, Dean knew forestry was a vital piece of the BC economy. But she knew little about the workings of the industry and wanted to learn more. “My interest was twofold,” Dean says. “I have a mother who loves to go through forests and name plants. And I’d been teaching economics for about 16 years and wanted to learn more about the industry and how it affects our Province, economy and people.”

The tour delivered. Dean’s group toured forestry-related sights on Vancouver Island in the Nanaimo and Parksville area. She’ll never forget suiting up in safety gear to visit a working sawmill. “We developed a real appreciation for the people who work in a sawmill because of what’s happening in there—the stuff flying around, the noise. I was very impressed with the amount of organization and safety precautions to make sure things were done properly.”

Dean’s group learned about the pine beetle scourge and forest management; why clear cuts, although they look un-

sightly, help with forest regeneration. When she returned to the classroom, she passed on what she had learned to her students. “Any time we were talking about natural resources and careers, it would come up. So definitely it was very helpful.” She also shared resources with her co-workers.

The Festival of Forestry was started in 1967 by former Truck Loggers Association President Bill Moore. As a young logger, Moore recognized the public misperceptions, particularly among teachers, toward his industry. To help counter the misinformation, he formed a non-profit educational society along with partners from industry, education, unions and government. One of the society’s primary mandates was to educate teachers about BC forest management, says Festival of Forestry board member Sandy McKellar. The teacher education idea arose from attitudes encountered by log truck drivers when they entered big cities with their trucks, she says. “They felt like Vancouverites had no idea that this industry existed in the rural communities and supported so many of the jobs and social structure.” Moore believed if teachers were better educated, they would then share that knowledge with students and perceptions would change.

Judging by surveys filled out by teachers both before and after the tours, the program is meeting its goal. For example,

in 2015, surveys were completed by 11 of the teachers before the tour, and 13 after. Pre-tour, the majority said they were not convinced that forestry was practised sustainably. At the end of the tour, all but one, who was not sure, had changed their minds. Most teachers who initially said they were only slightly or somewhat familiar with the forest products cycle ended up feeling moderately familiar. And after the tour all 13 teachers reported they now understand how harvesting areas are chosen, a switch from the three who first answered yes.

Initially, the tours were open only to teachers from the big cities of Victoria and Vancouver, communities largely removed from the forestry industry. Today they reach further afield. “The logic behind that is even teachers in schools in Prince George and Kamloops and other communities where forestry is the predominant employer, often still have very little knowledge about what the forest industry is or how it supports their community,” McKellar says.

That pretty much describes Adrian Pendergast, who as vice-principal at Port Hardy Secondary, started a forestry program at his school. “It’s hands down the biggest employer in the North Island. But we realized a lot of students planning on pursuing post-secondary (education) were not thinking of or even recognizing that forestry existed as an option.” The students had a narrow view of the industry. They talked about becoming fallers, machine operators and truck drivers, but were oblivious to some of the jobs that required a college diploma or university degree, Pendergast says.

Starting a forestry program was a stretch for Pendergast, who has a biology background but had never worked in the industry. He leaned on industry partners for advice on what to teach and to provide students with work experience placements. The Truck Loggers Association gave a grant to help outfit students with the proper equipment—boots and high-visibility safety gear. The program is a big commitment for students; it is offered as an elective taken on top of other courses. So Pendergast knew it would have to be packed with interesting



All photos courtesy of Jason Keirlick

hands-on experiences to garner interest. To his surprise, about half the students who have signed on for the course over the years have been female.

The program was already planned when Pendergast went on a Festival of Forestry tour. “It was in the Lower Mainland when I did it and it gave me some other ideas of things we might do, even visiting a mill.” When his school forestry program began, he organized a field trip to the mill in Crofton so students could see where the North Island wood was going. “The Festival of Forestry helped me realize some of the partnerships that would be available. We went on tour, for instance, with a forester in Squamish and it wasn’t hard for me to see that same kind of activity could take place in Vancouver Island North.” Pendergast found his own experience so valuable he participated in planning a future festival. “And I went out with the teachers this time to give the perspective of how I had used some of the things I had seen, not just in a forestry program, but in a science class or tourism.”

Port Hardy’s school forestry program is just one of a number on Vancouver Island. Jason Kerluck runs a forestry course at Carihi Secondary in Campbell River that gives students a science and elective credit. He’s had his share of challenges filling the course, which runs for an entire afternoon for five months. “A lot of kids these days don’t necessarily want to put themselves in anything with uncertainty. And there’s a lot of negative association with forestry, even in Campbell River.” Kerluck should know. He has a forestry diploma and started out in the logging industry before earning a Master of Education degree. Kerluck is bullish on the forestry industry and believes there are huge opportunities in the field, particularly for Indigenous students from First Nations running forestry companies. And he’s now planning to bridge his school program with a new two-year forestry diploma program he helped design at Campbell River’s North Island College. Eventually, successful grads from the high-school program entering the college program will be credited with their first

semester toward a diploma, a huge savings for any student, Kerluck says.

McKellar emphasizes the festival tours have just as much value for teachers with young students. McKellar once tagged along on a tour where an elementary teacher saw a logger cutting discs—known in the industry as cookies—off the end of a log. “She started envisioning all the different ways she could use that to teach math. To teach the science of a circle, the diameter, radius and circumference and also at the same time talk about the growth rings.” The logger got so excited that he cut her a set of cookies to carry home. Lower Mainland teachers can spin what they learn on the tours into interesting field trips for their students. And it’s those young students the festival wants most to reach. By the time kids reach high school, a lot of them have formed strong opinions about forestry and already made a career choice, McKellar notes. “The younger kids are still open.”▲

