MANAGING FOR FIRST NATIONS CULTURAL VALUES

By Ian MacNeill

Silviculture has come a long way in British Columbia. Long gone are the days when sidehills were strip-logged and left to degrade into barren rock under the corrosive impact of wind and water. On average, 80 per cent of harvested land is replanted annually (the balance is maintained through natural regeneration), and an estimated 218 million seedlings go into the ground. It's a crucial component of BC's long-term forest sustainability strategy; harvesting of second-growth forests already represents about half of the allowable annual cut, and that share will increase in the coming decades. But while replanting trees is definitely a good thing, says Jim McGrath natural resources manager for the Kamloops Indian Band, current practices aren't always enough to return forests to their former ecologically balanced state, at least in terms of Indigenous values. And when you understand the values he's talking about, it's easy to see that instilling them would not only serve the interests of British Columbia's First Nations people, but of anyone who believes in the long-term cultural, economic, and recreational value of BC forests.

It helps to start with the long view. Since time immemorial, and before the arrival of industrial harvesting, forests grew, got old, and eventually died. The normal process of regeneration was fire, which created a clean slate and a nutrient-rich environment for nature to develop the kind of diversified old-growth forests we see today, which don't just contain commercial grade soft woods, but a wide variety of bushes and shrubs that helped sustain the diets and habitat of both humans and animals. However, the regeneration process that follows clear-cut harvesting tends to create a different kind of forest, one that tends to be lacking in berry-producing bushes and shrubs. Similarly, planting conifers alone deprives animals like the moose of one of its most important food sources, willow. "People and animals don't eat pine trees," says McGrath, "They eat berries and the deer that feed off them."

This conclusion about insufficient diversity is based on science as well as First Nations observation. McGrath points to an SFU study that compared forest regrowth following timber harvesting and fires. The report concluded that post-fire forests were more diversified. "In a cutblock there is a bit of disturbance and you just don't get all the shrub species," he says.

This is not an irresolvable problem, and it does not involve using fire as a more widespread management technique, which wouldn't fly anyway. The solution is to take a more diversified approach to replanting. Don't just introduce conifer seedlings, but mix in important shrubs like Saskatoon berry, huckleberry, and soopolallie, or soapberry, which is not only an edible, albeit a bitter one, but has been used for generations in Native communities to treat high blood pressure, digestive disorders, acne, and to bring on childbirth. Similarly, when decommissioning roads, McGrath would prefer to see them sowed with willow plugs,

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an important food source for moose. And there's more to it than just planting, he adds. Managing according to Indigenous values might include keeping a road open in order to provide access for hunters, or closing one down where there's too much traffic. It might also include setbacks, say for example to protect a spiritual bathing area. Every situation would be unique and require tailor-made solutions based on the environment and local values.

Of course, this extra layer of management comes at a cost, and the question then becomes, who pays for it. According to Matt Wealick, chair of the TLA's Aboriginal Affairs Committee, while licensees are often sympathetic to Indigenous values, they aren't always willing to foot the bill for them.

"Licensees are typically only interested in the economics of the deal," says Wealick. "Cultural values tend to come fairly low on the list of priorities." Plus, he adds, they are not *obliged* to take into consideration costs associated with cultural values, although they often do to promote goodwill.

Similarly, it hardly seems fair to hand the bill entirely to First Nations. In addition to the intrinsic and economic values associated with having diversified forests that devolve to all British Columbians, they provide stumpage revenues that fund schools, roads, healthcare, and infrastructure projects, to name a few. The solution, says McGrath would be to share the costs among all beneficiaries, including Indigenous people, licensees, and the people of BC by making an allowance for cultural management in the rate of stumpage paid to the Province, and enshrining that allowance in the *Coastal and Interior Appraisal Manuals.*

"Let's say we allocate one dollar per cubic metre to fund cultural management practices," he explains. "And let's say the stumpage rate is $10 per cubic metre. If we could reduce that by one dollar the costs would be covered."

It's a unique proposal, and one that has been met with support from at least one licensee. "It's a really innovative proposal," says Michael Bragg, Tolko's woodlands manager of forestry in the Southern Interior, who works extensively with the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Band, located in the Kamloops area.

He adds that Tolko is already doing what it can to incorporate Indigenous cultural values in its cutblock planning, but admits that it can get complicated, and expensive. It typically starts with Indigenous field crews "spending time" determining what values there are in a given block through an office and field review, making recommendations to the companies that are proponents of the block, and then having the company field crews look for the opportunities to try to incorporate those values into their block-level plans. These plans are then put forward to the operational crew to implement, sometimes requiring the buncher to slow down and work around key features.

He adds that if licensees could get better cost recognition for the work they are already doing, the work they would be willing to take on, and if more cultural management practices were implemented, "then there would probably be a lot more uptake from licensees." An additional value-added benefit is that it would strengthen relations between licensees and their Indigenous partners. "Jim (McGrath) is definitely on to something," he says.

Matt Wealick adds that in terms of what the provincial government is trying to achieve in terms of developing policy and legislation with respect to First Nations, it only makes sense.

"The government is always trying to maximize revenues, and we understand that this goes against that," he says, but adds that economic values are only part of the equation; incorporating Indigenous values now will pay dividends as more diversified forests grow to maturity. "It would give licensees an incentive to manage with respect to cultural values instead of them looking for reasons to not do it, and it allows the provincial government to live up to one of its stated goals, which is to develop policy in accordance with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP).

It will be up to the Province to make the next move, but it is encouraging that Premier John Horgan has already stated that legislation bringing the Province into line with UNDRIP, which includes 46 articles meant to recognize the basic human rights of Indigenous Peoples along with their rights to self-determination, was going to be "more than symbolic."