

FORESTRY COMMUNITY: REVELSTOKE

By Robin Brunet

Photo courtesy of Steve Shannon/Tourism Revelstoke

It wasn't too many years ago when an Internet search of Revelstoke yielded a bounty of information about forestry, mining, and how the city was created in the 1880s when the Canadian Pacific Railway was built through the area.

What a difference economic diversification makes. In 2019, a Google search of Revelstoke first yields Revelstoke Mountain Resort, which urges guests to ski North America's greatest vertical at 1,713 metres. Next comes Tourism Revelstoke, followed by a slew of travel advice and recreational opportunities in the vicinity (not the least of which is exploring a future outdoor adventure park featuring zip lining, bungee jumping, and surfing on a man-made lake).

With this, Revelstoke joins the long list of BC's logging towns that are known exclusively by younger generations as a

tourism playground, or as a great place to raise a family due to the ideal blend of pristine outdoors and small town amenities.

Yet, with a population of 7,500 and situated on the banks of the Columbia River amid prime cedar, fir, and spruce stands, Revelstoke is still very much dependent on logging for its livelihood. The resource industry built the city's fortunes to the point where it had the wherewithal to diversify; and now that forestry comes a close second after tourism in fueling local economic activity, policy makers and residents are very much motivated to retain its health moving forward.

Mike Copperthwaite, general manager of the Revelstoke Community Forest Corporation (RCFC), says, "We're resilient, but 2019 can't be compared to 2018 or 2017, which were great years because

of strong log prices. It's no secret that prices have gone down as of late, and there's been an increase in stumpage, plus there is less interest in some species of wood—so we're pulling back on our reins a little bit."

Contributing to community concerns—for tourism as well as logging—is the federal/provincial caribou recovery plan, which made headlines in May of 2018 when federal Environment Minister Catherine McKenna declared mountain caribou to be facing "imminent threat" and ordered Victoria to take immediate action. If the John Horgan government's response is deemed inadequate, Ottawa could enact conservation measures that would further restrict forestry and the backcountry recreation industry.



Mountain caribou preservation issues have been a fact of life in Revelstoke for decades, but considering 90 per cent of the RCFC's Tree Farm Licence (TFL) is technically in caribou habitat, the licence could close in a worst-case scenario (to date, 8,000 hectares of the TFL's 120,000-hectare geographical range has already been put aside for caribou, and the RCFC harvests about 200 hectares out of an estimated 18,000 hectares of operable land).

The provincial forest ministry has stated that the most core caribou habitat is already protected from harvesting, but the feds have argued that while survival of the species is not at risk, their recovery is.

Revelstoke Mayor Gary Sulz says, "We fought for an entire year to get a seat at the table with regards to recovery plan negotiations, which are ongoing, and we're holding Victoria to its contention that enough land has been set aside."

For the record, Sulz perceives Premier Horgan to be "a stand up, intelligent man who understands the importance of logging to our community. But we really don't know how this will play out with Ottawa potentially becoming involved."

If nothing else, Revelstoke residents aren't shy about presenting a united front: in April, over 800 people filled the Community Centre auditorium, and spilled into the hallway, and thousands more tuned in to watch as provincial government representatives gathered feedback on two draft agreements to protect the caribou (a process that will end next May). While some people called for stricter logging restrictions, most were concerned with tourism recreation restrictions and the impact to the local economy.

In some ways, press coverage of the caribou initiative has highlighted the scope and importance of forestry to Revelstoke.

The RCFC is a community owned tenure whose TFL was purchased in 1993 via a community referendum, in the spirit of the city wanting more control over local resources. Since then, its members have created a legacy fund in excess of \$1 million that Revelstoke can leverage for infrastructure projects (this year, the city spent \$100,000 of that fund on the creation of a splash park).

Over the years, Revelstoke's processing capabilities have evolved to make maximum use of the region's diversity of stands and changing market conditions. "Total harvest in the area is 450,000 cubic metres; the RCFC cuts about 90,000 cubic metres per year, and our regional mills take advantage of niche markets," says Copperthwaite. "For example, our largest mill, operated by Downie Timber, produces decking and siding and other high-value products, and this has helped keep operations going at a time when many conventional Interior mills have closed due to Mountain Pine Beetle volumes no longer being available or have deteriorated to the point it is not economically feasible to harvest."

Much in the way forestry has diversified, civic planners have diversified the regional economy overall. "Tourism started to really take off in the early 2000s, to the point where our ski hills attracted people from Whistler," says Sulz. "Today one of the biggest growths is in mountain biking, which has helped tourism in this region become a year-round sector with very little downtime."

With Revelstoke now a destination and not just a resources town, its demographic is changing. "A lot of younger tech professionals come here to work because they can do so from home and want to enjoy the benefits of a rural environment," says Sulz. "Many of these people subsequently realize Revelstoke is also a great place to raise a family—

and their parents have discovered us as an equally desirable place to enjoy retirement. So we're enjoying the best of all worlds."

The influx of younger residents is in turn benefitting the future trajectory of Revelstoke. Sulz explains, "Many of these people are entrepreneurs with great ideas that could further diversify our economy. For instance, one individual is planning to make tiny homes, which are all the rage in North America due to their affordability and mobility—and if his plans go through, it would be a much-needed boost to our housing inventory.

"There are also plans to turn pulp logs into secondary products, and many other initiatives are in development. The point is, with the influx of younger people comes the proliferation of outside-the-box thinking, which is exciting and much welcome as we move forward."

Just as Sulz looks forward to Revelstoke's continued evolution, Copperthwaite is anticipating a solid 2020 for the forestry sector, unpredictable elements like the caribou initiative notwithstanding.

He says, "we're starting to see improved log prices as the housing and renovation markets in the US hold steady and improve respectively. As for the stumpage issue, it's being dealt with. I think overall, 2020 will turn out to be better than 2019—and 2019 certainly wasn't bad by any means.

"We have great forest stands, solid infrastructure, and the will to protect the gains we've made. Yes, there are issues to face, but we're facing them head-on. Let's see what happens in the New Year."▲