

# THE IMBALANCE OF FORESTRY TEACHINGS

By Robin Brunet

For logging families, one of the more frustrating aspects of the public school system has been the perceived imbalance of forestry teachings, often leading to the tendency of students to decide that logging is bad for the environment—an opinion that green groups sometimes use to advance their anti-logging campaigns.

That happened earlier this year when David Hoy Elementary students in Fort St. James were asked by their teacher to participate in the BC government's Old Growth Strategic Review. Seventy-five drawings were submitted to Victoria, but 14 of them wound up on the Sierra Club of BC's website accompanied by the title "Students Are Standing Up For Old-Growth."

The drawings, which contained messages from the students such as "Stop cutting [sic] down the trees!" and "The earth needs trees for oxygen!" were also published on the Sierra Club's Facebook page—and the organization was promptly criticized for manipulating children. "Someone should be teaching children real facts and not your propaganda," one Facebook member wrote.

Predictable questions were asked: How did Sierra Club obtain the artwork? Was the teacher, Gail Hiebert, affiliated with the club? Also, were all of the 75 drawings biased against logging?

But at least one parent was inspired to ask the broader question: Can the same processes that enable BC's public education system to accommodate environmentalists' teachings allow loggers to deliver their message with the same degree of influence?



Rob Ubleis, a TLA member and president of Ubleis Logging Ltd. whose six-year-old daughter attends David Hoy Elementary, believes so—at least in theory. "When I found out about the drawings I was angry that the Sierra Club had obtained them and exploited them, so I had a healthy conversation with the school principal," he says. "She told me that David Hoy and the school system in general is committed to exposing children to a wide variety of perspectives. She acknowledged that the exercise behind the drawings was to view old growth for values other than economic—and that I was more than welcome to come to the school and express my views under certain circumstances and approvals."

Ubleis declined, as he would have been an army of one unable to approximate the influence of well-funded and organized green groups such as the Sierra Club. "Plus, I couldn't help but think that as troubling as it is for elementary-age children to be biased against industry, the mindset will intensify as their education progresses—despite schools maintaining that they strive to tell both sides of the story," he says.

Sandy McKellar, founder of Tree Frog Creative Communications and a forest industry recruitment and communications specialist for over 20 years, sympathizes with Ubleis. In her role of promoting the University of BC's Faculty of Forestry to school kids throughout the province in the late 1990s, she encountered substantial resistance to any initiative promoting logging. "Ironically, it was harder for me to get my message across in outlying schools," she says. "I suspect it was because a lot of the teachers in those rural areas were from the big city and brought their big city perspective with them.

"On one occasion I was even told by a principal that 'our kids don't have any interest in forestry,' then he lamented about Douglas fir going extinct in his neck of the woods—even though Douglas fir didn't grow in the region."

But McKellar thinks the "us versus them" mindset that once made her job so difficult has abated. "By the time I visited high schools on behalf of UBC in 2010 the students exhibited a degree of sophistication about the industry that was previously lacking," she says. "I remember several of them agreeing with me that more wood use was needed in the province because of wood's positive impact on climate change."

So, what caused the shift in attitude? McKellar theorizes, "Maybe a lot of industry groups with outreach programs kept hammering home their message. The provincial government's advocacy of wood use certainly helped. Maybe enough noise was generated by our side that it counterbalanced the negative—at least somewhat."

BC teachers are not allowed to talk directly to media, but School District 91 Assistant Superintendent Mike Skinner says of the circumstances that led to the David Hoy anti-logging drawings, "I've been here 27 years and we're a logging community, and yes, our goal is to expose children to different opinions. However, while I'm aware of the BC government's Old Growth Strategic Review, I wasn't aware of the Sierra Club's involvement."

When asked if the Sierra Club was involved in the review, for-ester and Triangle Resources Incorporated President Al Gorley, who conducted the review with RPF Gary Merkel, told *Truck LoggerBC* via email, “Sierra Club had the same opportunity for input as TLA and many other organizations and individuals. Individuals or organizations that made submissions to us may have also shared them with others. We would not necessarily be aware of that.”

It fell upon Tim Pearson, communications director of Sierra Club BC, to shed light on the matter and explain how his organization becomes involved in school activity in general. “As with any government process seeking input, we encouraged people to get involved with the Old Growth Strategic Review,” he says. “We sent emails to about 30,000 supporters and emailed people from our educational list, with Gail Hiebert being one recipient.”

Pearson adds that Hiebert sent the club 20 drawings, “But only 14 scanned well, so we used these.” He could not say if all 75 drawings were anti-logging.

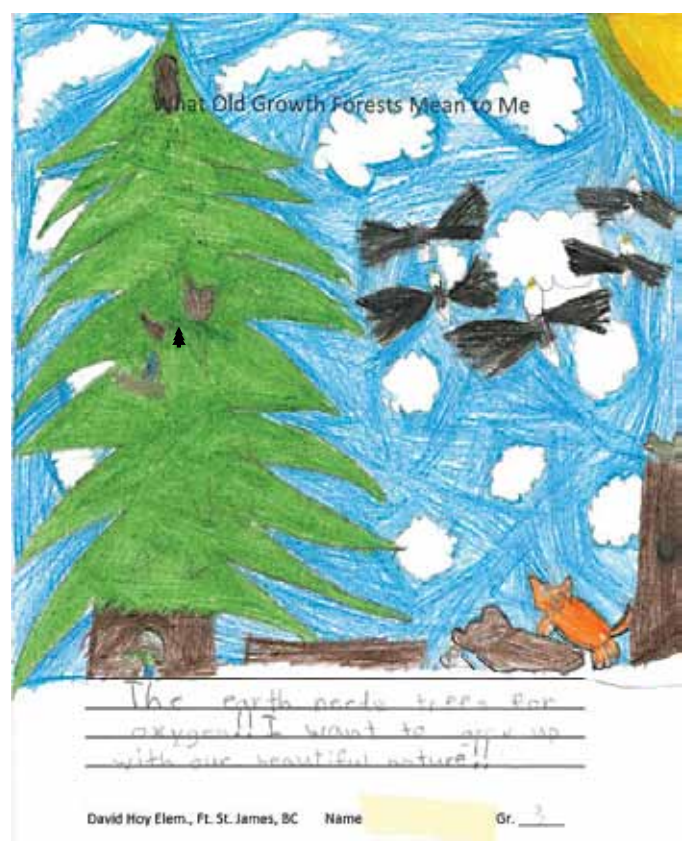
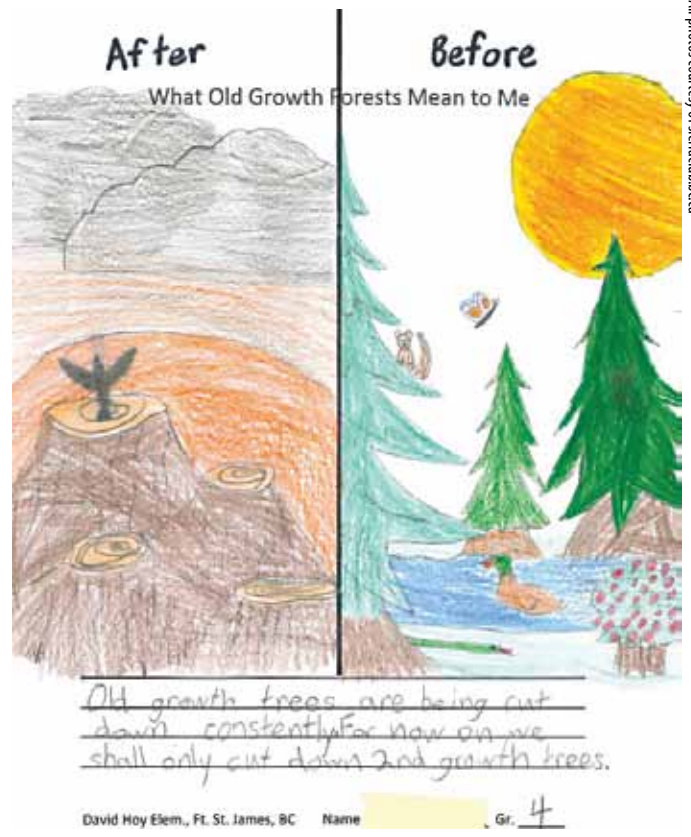
While admitting that his organization is opposed to old-growth logging “but not against sustainable harvesting,” Pearson says it’s up to the provincial government to set school curriculum, “and teachers must deliver. But they have latitude in how competencies are developed, so we help teachers deliver by providing workshops facilitated by educators who share a passion for local natural environments.” Nearly 150,000 K-8 students in BC have participated in these outdoor workshops since the club’s education programs were launched in 1998.

Content aside, McKellar believes the methods by which the Sierra Club gets its message across are effective. “I found that the only way I could get kids to buy into what I was saying was to reach them when they were as young as possible, before they were exposed to other influencers,” she says. “The best classes for me were grades three and four, when kids were hungry for information and could digest a surprising amount of science content.”

By contrast, McKellar says of older students, “Too many of them were determined to save the world and not willing to process further information.”

McKellar also believes the messengers may be as important as the message. “I currently work with Canadian Women in Timber, and they have great success presenting in rural schools—possibly because they present a slightly softer image than your traditional logger,” she says.

For his part, Ubleis accepts the school system’s mantra that it welcomes a spectrum of educational perspectives. “But although groups such as the TLA have great educational programs, trying to match the influence of green groups—who really got the jump on us with their educational programs—will take a concentrated effort on our part. That is, if we’re still fired up enough about the topic to do something meaningful about it.”



All photos courtesy of sierrclubbc.ca